THE DOUBLE FOUR

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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BY

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THE DOUBLE FOUR

CHAPTER I

THE DESIRE OF MADAME

"*It is the desire of Madame that you should join our circle here on Thursday evening next, at ten o'clock.*—SOGRANGE."

THE man looked up from the sheet of notepaper which he held in his hand, and gazed through the open French windows before which he was standing. It was a very pleasant and very peaceful prospect. There was his croquet lawn, smooth-shaven, the hoops neatly arranged, the chalk mark firm and distinct upon the boundary. Beyond, the tennis court, the flower gardens, and to the left the walled fruit garden. A little farther away was the paddock and orchard, and a little farther still the farm, which for the last four years had been the joy of his life. His meadows were yellow with buttercups; a thin line of willows showed where the brook wound its lazy way through the bottom fields. It was a home, this, in which

a man could well lead a peaceful life, could dream away his days to the music of the west wind, the gurgling stream, the song of birds, and the low murmuring of insects. Peter Ruff stood like a man turned to stone, for even as he looked these things passed away from before his eyes, the roar of the world beat in his ears—the world of intrigue, of crime, the world where the strong man hewed his way to power, and the weaklings fell like corn before the sickle.

"*It is the desire of Madame!*"

Peter Ruff clenched his fists as he read the words once more. It was a message from a world every memory of which had been deliberately crushed—a world, indeed, in which he had seemed no longer to hold any place. He was Peter Ruff, Esquire, of Aynesford Manor, in the County of Somerset. It could not be for him, this strange summons.

The rustle of a woman's soft draperies broke in upon his reverie. He turned round with his usual morning greeting upon his lips. She was, without doubt, a most beautiful woman: petite, and well moulded, with the glow of health in her eyes and on her cheeks. She came smiling to him —a dream of muslin and pink ribbons.

"Another forage bill, my dear Peter?" she demanded, passing her arm through his. "Put it away and admire my new morning gown. It came straight from Paris, and you will have to pay a great deal of money for it."

He pulled himself together—he had no secrets from his wife.

"Listen," he said, and read aloud:

"*Rue de St. Quintaine, Paris.*

"DEAR MR. RUFF,—*It is a long time since we had the pleasure of a visit from you. It is the desire of Madame that you should join our circle here on Thursday evening next, at ten o'clock.*—SOGRANGE."

Violet was a little perplexed. She failed, somehow, to recognise the sinister note underlying those few sentences.

"It sounds friendly enough," she remarked. "You are not obliged to go, of course."

Peter Ruff smiled grimly.

"Yes, it sounds all right," he admitted.

"They won't expect you to take any notice of it, surely?" she continued. "When you bought this place, Peter, you gave them definitely to understand that you had retired into private life, that all these things were finished with you."

"There are some things," Peter Ruff said slowly, "which are never finished."

"But you resigned," she reminded him. "I remember your letter distinctly."

"From the Double Four," he answered, "no resignation is recognised save death. I did what I could, and they accepted my explanations gracefully and without comment. Now that the time has come, however, when they need, or think they need, my help, you see they do not hesitate to claim it."

"You will not go, Peter? You will not think of going?" she begged.

He twisted the letter between his fingers and sat down to his breakfast.

"No," he said, "I shall not go."

That morning Peter Ruff spent upon his farm, looking over his stock, examining some new machinery, and talking crops with his bailiff. In the afternoon he played his customary round of golf. It was the sort of day which, as a rule, he found completely satisfactory, yet, somehow or other, a certain sense of weariness crept in upon him towards its close. The agricultural details in which he was accustomed to take so much interest had fallen a little flat. He even found himself

wondering, after one of his best drives, whether it was well for the mind of a man to be so utterly engrossed by the flight of that small white ball towards its destination. More than once lately, despite his half-angry rejection of them, certain memories, half-wistful, half-tantalising, from the world of which he now saw so little, had forced their way in upon his attention. This morning the lines of that brief note seemed to stand out before him all the time with a curious vividness. In a way he played the hypocrite to himself. He professed to have found that summons disturbing and unwelcome, yet his thoughts were continually occupied with it. He knew well that what would follow was inevitable, but he made no sign.

Two days later he received another letter. This time it was couched in different terms. On a square card, at the top of which was stamped a small coronet, he read as follows:

"*Madame de Maupassim at home, Saturday evening, May 2nd, at ten o'clock.*"

In small letters at the bottom left-hand corner were added the words:

"*To meet friends.*"

Peter Ruff put the card upon the fire and went out for a morning's rabbit shooting with his keeper. When he returned, luncheon was ready, but Violet was absent. He rang the bell.

"Where is your mistress, Jane?" he asked the parlourmaid.

The girl had no idea. Mrs. Ruff had left for the village several hours ago. Since then she had not been seen.

Peter Ruff ate his luncheon alone and understood. The afternoon wore on, and at night he travelled up to London. He knew better than to waste time by purposeless inquiries. Instead he took the nine o'clock train the next morning to Paris.

It was a chamber of death into which he was ushered—dismal, yet, of its sort, unique, marvellous. The room itself might have been the sleeping apartment of an Empress—lofty, with white panelled walls adorned simply with gilded lines; with high windows, closely curtained now so that neither sound nor the light of day might penetrate into the room. In the middle of the apartment, upon a canopy bedstead which had once adorned a king's palace, lay Madame de Maupassim. Her face was already touched with the finger of death.

yet her eyes were undimmed and her lips unquivering. Her hands, covered with rings, lay out before her upon the lace coverlid. Supported by many pillows, she was issuing her last instructions with the cold precision of the man of affairs who makes the necessary arrangements for a few days' absence from his business.

Peter Ruff, who had not even been allowed sufficient time to change his travelling clothes, was brought without hesitation to her bedside. She looked at him in silence for a moment with a cold glitter in her eyes.

"You are four days late, Monsieur Peter Ruff," she remarked. "Why did you not obey your first summons?"

"Madame," he answered, "I thought that there must be a misunderstanding. Four years ago I gave notice to the council that I had married and retired into private life. A country farmer is of no further use to the world."

The woman's thin lip curled.

"From death and the Double Four," she said, "there is no resignation which counts. You are as much our creature to-day as I am the creature of the disease which is carrying me across the threshold of death."

Peter Ruff remained silent. The woman's words

seemed full of dread significance. Besides, how was it possible to contradict the dying ?

" It is upon the unwilling of the world," she continued, speaking slowly, yet with extraordinary distinctness, " that its greatest honours are often conferred. The name of my successor has been balloted for secretly. It is you, Peter Ruff, who have been chosen."

This time he was silent, because he was literally bereft of words. This woman was dying, and fancying strange things ! He looked from one to the other of the stern, pale faces of those who were gathered around her bedside. Seven of them there were—the same seven. At that moment their eyes were all focused upon him. Peter Ruff shrank back.

" Madame," he murmured, " this cannot be."

Her lips twitched as though she would have smiled.

" What we have decided," she said, " we have decided. Nothing can alter that—not even the will of Mr. Peter Ruff."

" I have been out of the world for four years," Peter Ruff protested. " I have no longer ambitions, no longer any desire——"

" You lie ! " the woman interrupted. " You lie, or you do yourself an injustice ! We gave

you four years, and, looking into your face, I think that it has been enough. I think that the weariness is there already. In any case, the charge which I lay upon you in these, my last moments, is one which you can escape by death only!"

A low murmur of voices from those others repeated her words.

"By death only!"

Peter Ruff opened his lips, but closed them again without speech. A wave of emotion seemed passing through the room. Something strange was happening. It was Death itself which had come amongst them.

A morning journalist wrote of the death of Madame eloquently and with feeling. She had been a broadminded aristocrat, a woman of brilliant intellect and great friendships, a woman of whose inner life during the last ten or fifteen years little was known, yet who, in happier times, might well have played a great part in the history of her country.

Peter Ruff drove back from the cemetery with the Marquis de Sogrange, and for the first time since the death of Madame serious subjects were spoken of.

"I have waited patiently," he declared, "but there are limits. I want my wife."

Sograngе took him by the arm and led him into the library of the house in the Rue de St. Quintaine. The six men who were already there waiting rose to their feet.

"Gentlemen," the Marquis said, "is it your will that I should be spokesman?"

There was a murmur of assent. Then Sograngе turned towards his companion, and something new seemed to have crept into his manner—a solemn, almost threatening note.

"Peter Ruff," he continued, "you have trifled with the one organisation in this world which has never allowed itself to have liberties taken with it or to be defied. Men who have done greater service than you have died for the disobedience of a day. You have been treated leniently, accordingly to the will of Madame. According to her will, and in deference to the position which you must now take up amongst us, we still treat you as no other has ever been treated by us. The Double Four admits your leadership and claims you for its own."

"I am not prepared to discuss anything of the sort," Peter Ruff declared doggedly, "until my wife is restored to me."

The Marquis smiled.

"The traditions of your race, Mr. Ruff," he said, "are easily manifest in you. Now, hear our decision. Your wife shall be restored to you on the day when you take up this position to which you have become entitled. Sit down and listen."

Peter Ruff was a rebel at heart, but he felt the grip of iron.

"During these four years when you, my friend, have been growing turnips and shooting your game, events in the world have marched, new powers have come into being, a new page of history has been opened. As everything which has good at the heart evolves toward the good, so we of the Double Four have lifted our great enterprise on to a higher plane. The world of criminals is still at our beck and call, we still claim the right to draw the line between moral theft and immoral honesty; but to-day the Double Four is concerned with greater things. Within the four walls of this room, within the hearing of these my brothers, whose fidelity is as sure as the stones of Paris, I tell you a splendid secret. The Government of our country has craved for our aid and the aid of our organisation. It is no longer the wealth of the world alone which we may control, but the actual destinies of nations."

"What I suppose you mean to say is," Peter Ruff remarked, "that you've been going in for politics?"

"You put it crudely, my English bulldog," Sograngе answered, "but you are right. We are occupied now by affairs of international importance. More than once during the last few months ours has been the hand which has changed the policy of an empire."

"Most interesting," Peter Ruff declared, "but so far as I personally am concerned——"

"Listen," the Marquis interrupted. "Not a hundred yards from the French Embassy in London there is waiting for you a house and servants no less magnificent than the Embassy itself. You will become the ambassador in London of the Double Four, titular head of our association, a personage whose power is second to none in your marvellous city. I do not address words of caution to you, my friend, because we have satisfied ourselves as to your character and capacity before we consented that you should occupy your present position. But I ask you to remember this: the will of Madame lives even beyond the grave. The spirit which animated her when alive breathes still in all of us. In London you will wield a great power. Use it for the common good. And re-

member this: the Double Four has never failed, the Double Four can never fail."

"I am glad to hear you are so confident," Peter Ruff said. "Of course, if I have to take this thing on I shall do my best; but, if I might venture to allude for a moment to anything so trifling as my own domestic affairs, I am very anxious to know about my wife."

Sogrange smiled.

"You will find Mrs. Ruff awaiting you in London," he announced. "Your address is Merton House, Berkeley Square."

"When do I go there?" Peter Ruff asked.

"To-night," was the answer.

"And what do I do when I get there?" he persisted.

"For three days," the Marquis told him, "you will remain indoors and give audience to whomever may come to you. At the end of that time, you will understand a little more of our purpose and our objects—perhaps even of our power."

"I see difficulties," Peter Ruff remarked. "My name, you see, is uncommon."

Sogrange drew a document from the breast pocket of his coat.

"When you leave this house to-night," he proclaimed, "we bid good-bye for ever to Mr.

Peter Ruff. You will find in this envelope the title-deeds of a small property which is our gift to you. Henceforth you will be known by the name and the title of your estates."

"Title!" Peter Ruff gasped.

"You will reappear in London," Sograngе continued, "as the Baron de Grost."

Peter Ruff shook his head.

"It won't do," he declared. "People will find me out."

"There is nothing to be found out," the Marquis went on, a little wearily. "Your country life has dulled your wits, Baron. The title and the name are justly yours—they go with the property. For the rest, the history of your family, and of your career up to the moment when you enter Merton House to-night, will be inside this packet. You can peruse it upon the journey, and remember that we can at all times bring a hundred witnesses, if necessary, to prove that you are whom you declare yourself to be. When you get to Charing Cross, do not forget that it will be the carriage and servants of the Baron de Grost which await you."

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "I suppose I shall get used to it."

"Naturally," Sograngе answered. "For the moment, we are passing through a quiet time, necessitated by the mortal illness of Madame. You will be able to spend the next few weeks in getting used to your new position. You will have a great many callers, inspired by us, who will see that you make the right acquaintances and that you join the right clubs. At the same time, let me warn you always to be ready. There is trouble brooding just now all over Europe. In one way or another we may become involved at any moment. The whole machinery of our society will be explained to you by your secretary. You will find him already installed at Merton House. A glass of wine, Baron, before you leave ?"

Peter Ruff glanced at the clock.

"There are my things to pack," he began.

Sograngе smiled.

"Your valet is already on the front seat of the automobile which is waiting," he remarked. "You will find him attentive and trustworthy. The clothes which you brought with you we have taken the liberty of dispensing with. You will find others in your trunk, and at Merton House you can send for any tailor you choose. One toast, Baron. We drink to the Double Four—to the great cause !"

There was a murmur of voices. Sograngе lifted once more his glass.

"May Peter Ruff rest in peace!" he said. "We drink to his ashes. We drink long life and prosperity to the Baron de Grost!"

The Marquis alone attended his guest to the station. They walked up and down the long platform of the Gare du Nord, Sograngе talking most of the time in an undertone, for there were many things which he yet had to explain. There came a time, however, when his grip upon his companion's arm suddenly tightened. They were passing a somewhat noticeable little group—a tall, fair man, with close-shaven hair and military moustache, dressed in an English travelling suit and Homburg hat, and by his side a very brilliant young woman, whose dark eyes, powdered face, and marvellous toilette rendered her a trifle conspicuous. In the background were a couple of servants.

"The Count von Hern-Bernadine!" the Marquis whispered.

Peter glanced at him for a moment as they passed.

"Bernadine, without a doubt!" he exclaimed. "And his companion?"

"Mademoiselle Delucie, from the *Comédie Française,*" the Marquis replied. "It is just like Bernadine to bring her here. He likes to parade the ostensible cause for his visit to Paris. It is all bluff. He cares little for the ladies of the theatre, or any other woman, except when he can make tools of them. He is here just now——"

The Marquis paused. Peter looked at him interrogatively.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you are here," the Marquis affirmed. "Baron, I meant to speak to you about that man before we parted. There is no great work done without difficulties. The greatest difficulty you will have to face in your new life is that man. It is very possible that you may find within the course of a few months that your whole career, your very life, has developed into a duel *à outrance* with him."

They had turned again, and were once more in sight of the little group. Bernadine had thrown a loose overcoat over his tweed travelling clothes, and with a cigarette between his fingers was engaged in deferential conversation with the woman by his side. His servant stood discreetly in the background, talking to the other domestic—a sombrely clad young person carrying a flat

jewel-case, obviously the maid of the young Frenchwoman.

"He is taking her across," the Marquis remarked. "It is not often that he travels like this. Perhaps he has heard that you are susceptible, my friend."

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"The game is too young yet!" he declared.

"It is never too young for Bernadine to take a hand," the Marquis replied grimly. "Listen, de Grost. Bernadine will probably try to make friends with you. You may think it wise to accept his advances, you may believe that you can guard your own secrets in his company; perhaps, even, that you may learn his. Do not try it, my friend. You have received the best proof possible that we do not underrate your abilities, but there is no other man like Bernadine. I would not trust myself alone with him."

"You are taking it for granted," Peter interposed, "that our interests must be at all times inimical."

The Marquis laid his hand upon the other's arm.

"My friend," he said, "there are interests which are sometimes elastic, *rapprochements* which may vary between chilly friendliness and a certain intimacy. But between the interests of the Double Four and the interests represented by that young

man there yawns the deepest gulf which you or any other man could conceive. Bernadine represents the Teuton—muscle and bone and sinew. He is German to the last drop of his heart's blood. Never undervalue him, I beseech you. He is not only a wonderful politician : he is a man of action, grim, unbending, unswerving as a man may be whose eyes are steadfastly fixed upon one goal. The friendships of France may sometimes change, but her one great enmity never. Bernadine represents that enmity. According to the measure of your success, so you will find him placid or venomous. Think of yourself as a monk, dear Baron, and Bernadine as the Devil Incarnate. From him there is safety only in absence."

Peter smiled as he shook hands with his companion and climbed into the train.

" At any rate," he said, " I have been warned."

During the journey to Boulogne, at least, the repeated warnings of the Marquis seemed quite unnecessary. Bernadine and his companion remained in their engaged carriage, and de Grost, who dined in the restaurant car and sauntered once or twice along the corridors, saw nothing of them. At Boulogne they stayed in their carriage until the rush on to the boat was over, and it was not until

they were half-way across the Channel that Peter felt suddenly an arm thrust through his as he leaned over the rail on the upper deck. He moved instinctively away from the vessel's side, a proceeding which seemed to afford some amusement to the man who had accosted him.

"Monsieur le Baron," said Bernadine, "let me be the first to congratulate you upon your new dignity."

"Very kind of you, I am sure, Count von Hern," Peter answered.

"Bernadine to you, my friend," the other protested. "So you have come once more into the great game?"

Peter remained silent. His features had assumed an expression of gentle inquiry.

"Once more I congratulate you," Bernadine continued. "In the old days you were shrewd and successful in your small undertakings, but you were, after all, little more than a policeman. To-day you stand for other things."

"Monsieur le Comte talks in enigmas," Peter murmured.

Bernadine smiled.

"Cautious as ever!" he exclaimed. "Ah, my dear Baron, you amuse me, you and the elegant Sogrange—Sogrange, who will pull the strings to

which you must dance. Do you think that I did not see you both upon the platform, gazing suspiciously at me? Do you think that I did not hear the words of warning you received as clearly as though I had been standing by your side? 'It is Bernadine!' Sograngé whispers. 'Bernadine and Mademoiselle Delucie—a dangerous couple! Have a care, Monsieur le Baron!' Oh, that is what passed, without a doubt! So when you take your place in the train you wrap yourself in an armour of isolation; you are ready all the time to repel some deep-laid scheme, you are relieved to discover that, so far, at any rate, this terrible Bernadine and his beautiful travelling companion have not forced themselves upon you. Is it not so?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"It is the south wind," he remarked, "which carries us across so quickly to-night."

"The south wind, without a doubt," Bernadine assented politely. "Dear Baron, my congratulations are sincere. No one can come into the battlefield, the real battlefield of life, without finding enemies there waiting for him. You and I represent different causes. When our interests clash, I shall not try to throw you off a Channel boat, or to buy you with a cheque, or to hand you

over to the tender mercies of the beautiful Mademoiselle Delucie. Until then, have no fear, my British friend. I shall not even ask you to drink with me, for I know that you would look suspiciously into the tumbler. *Au revoir,* and good fortune ! "

Bernadine passed into the shadows and sank into a steamer chair by the side of his travelling companion. Peter continued his lonely walk, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his overcoat, his eyes fixed upon the Folkestone lights, becoming every moment clearer and clearer.

At Charing Cross all was as Sogrange had indicated. His servant remained to look after the luggage, a tall footman conducted him towards a magnificent automobile. Then, indeed, he forgot Bernadine and all this new stir of life—forgot everything in a sudden rush of joy. It was Violet who leaned forward to greet him—Violet, looking her best, and altogether at her ease amongst this new splendour.

" Welcome, Monsieur le Baron ! " she whispered as he took his place by her side.

He took her hands and held them tightly, closely.

" I always knew," he murmured, " that you hankered after a title."

"Such a snob, aren't I!" she exclaimed. "Never mind, you wait!"

They were moving rapidly westward now. A full moon was shining down upon the city, the streets were thronged with pedestrians and a block of vehicles. The Carlton was all ablaze. In the softening light Pall Mall had become a stately thoroughfare, the Haymarket and Regent Street picturesque with moving throngs, a stream of open cabs, women in cool evening dresses, men without hats or overcoats, on their way from the theatres. It was a vivid, almost a fascinating little picture. Peter caught a glimpse of his wife's face as she looked upon it.

"I believe," he whispered, "that you are glad."

She turned upon him with a wonderful smile, the light flashing in her eyes.

"Glad! Oh, Peter, of course I am glad! I hated the country; I pined and longed for life. Couldn't you see it, dear? Now we are back in it again—back amongst the big things. Peter, dear, you were never meant to shoot rabbits and play golf, to grow into the likeness of those awful people who think of nothing but sport and rural politics and their neighbours' weaknesses! The man who throws life away before he has done with it, dear, is a wastrel. Be thankful

that it's back again in your hands—be thankful, as I am!"

He sighed, and with that sigh went all his regrets for the life which had once seemed to him so greatly to be desired. He recognised in those few seconds the ignominy of peace.

"There is not the slightest doubt about it," he admitted, "I do make mistakes."

The automobile came to a standstill before the portico of an imposing mansion at the corner of Berkeley Square.

"We are home!" Violet whispered. "Try to look as though you were used to it all!"

A grave-faced major-domo was already upon the steps. In the hall was a vision of more footmen in quiet but impressive livery. Violet entered with an air of familiarity. Peter, with one last sigh, followed her. There was something significant to him in that formal entrance into his new and magnificent home. Outside, Peter Ruff seemed somewhere to have vanished into thin air. It was the Baron de Grost who had entered into his body—the Baron de Grost with a ready-made present, a fictitious past, a momentous future.

CHAPTER II

THE AMBASSADOR'S WIFE

ALONE in his study, with fast-locked door, Baron de Grost sat reading word by word with zealous care the dispatch from Paris which had just been delivered into his hands. From the splendid suite of reception-rooms which occupied the whole of the left-hand side of the hall, came the faint sound of music. The street outside was filled with automobiles and carriages setting down their guests. Madame was receiving to-night a gathering of very distinguished men and women, and it was only on very urgent business indeed that her husband had dared to leave her side.

The room in which he sat was in darkness except for the single heavily shaded electric lamp which stood by his elbow. Peter was wearing Court dress, with immaculate black silk stockings, and diamond buckles upon his shoes. A red ribbon was in his button-hole and a French order hung from his neck. His passion for clothes was certainly amply ministered to by the exigencies

of his new position. Once more he read those last few words of this unexpectedly received dispatch—read them with a frown upon his forehead and the light of trouble in his eyes. For three months he had done nothing but live the life of an ordinary man of fashion and wealth. His first task—for which, to tell the truth, he had been anxiously waiting—was here before him, and he found it little to his liking. Again he read slowly to himself the last paragraph of Sograngе's letter :—

"*As ever, dear friend, one of the greatest sayings which the men of my race have ever perpetrated, once more justifies itself, 'Cherchez la femme!' Of monsieur we have no manner of doubt; we have tested him in every way. And, to all appearance, madame should also be above suspicion. Yet those things of which I have spoken have happened. For two hours this morning I was closeted with Picon here. Very reluctantly he has placed the matter in my hands. I pass it on to you. It is your first undertaking, cher Baron, and I wish you bon fortune. A man of gallantry, as I know you are, you may regret that it should be a woman—and a beautiful woman, too—against whom the finger must be pointed. Yet, after all, the fates are strong and the task is yours.*—SOGRANGE."

The music from the reception-rooms grew louder and more insistent. Peter rose to his feet, and, moving to the fireplace, struck a match and carefully destroyed the letter which he had been reading. Then he straightened himself, glanced for a moment at the mirror, and left the room to join his guests.

"Monsieur le Baron jests," the lady murmured. Peter shook his head.

"Indeed, no, madame!" he answered earnestly. "France has offered us nothing more delightful in the whole history of our *entente* than the loan of yourself and your brilliant husband. Monsieur de Lamborne makes history amongst us politically, whilst madame——"

Peter sighed, and his companion leaned a little towards him. Her dark eyes were full of sentimental regard.

"Yes?" she whispered. "Continue. It is my wish."

"I am the good friend of Monsieur de Lamborne," Peter said, and in his tone there seemed to lurk some far-away touch of regret, "yet madame knows that her conquests here have been many."

The ambassador's wife fanned herself and remained silent for a moment, a faint smile playing

at the corners of her full, curving lips. She was indeed a very beautiful woman—elegant, a Parisian to the finger-tips, with pale cheeks but eyes dark and soft; eyes trained to her service, whose flash was an inspiration, whose very droop had set beating the hearts of men less susceptible than the Baron de Grost. Her gown was magnificent, of amber satin—a colour daring but splendid; the outline of her figure as she leaned slightly back in her seat might indeed have been traced by the inspired finger of some great sculptor. Peter, whose reputation as a man of gallantry was well established, felt the whole charm of her presence—felt, too, the subtle indications of preference which she seemed inclined to accord to him. There was nothing which eyes could say which hers were not saying during those few minutes. Peter, indeed, glanced around a little nervously. His wife had still her moments of unreasonableness; it was just as well that she was engaged with a party of her guests at the farther end of the apartments!

"You are trying to turn my head," his beautiful companion whispered. "You flatter me."

"It is not possible," he answered.

Again the fan fluttered.

"Ah, monsieur," she continued, dropping her voice until it scarcely rose above a whisper, "there

are not many men like you. You speak of my husband and his political gifts. Yet, what, after all, do they amount to? What is his position, indeed, if one glanced behind the scenes, compared with yours?"

The face of the Baron de Grost became like a mask. It was as though suddenly he had felt the thrill of danger close at hand—danger even in that scented atmosphere wherein he sat.

"Alas, madame!" he answered, "it is you now who are pleased to jest. Your husband is a great and powerful ambassador. I, unfortunately, have no career, no place in life, save the place which the possession of a few millions gives to a successful financier."

She laughed very softly, and again her eyes spoke to him.

"Monsieur," she murmured, "you and I together could make a great alliance; is it not so?"

"Madame," he faltered doubtfully, "if one dared hope——"

Once more the fire of her eyes, this time not only voluptuous. Was the man stupid or only cautious?

"If that alliance were once concluded," she said softly, "one might hope for everything."

"If it rests only with me," he began seriously, "oh, madame!"

He seemed overcome. Madame was gracious; but was he really stupid or only very much in earnest?

"To be one of the world's money kings," she whispered, "it is wonderful, that. It is power—supreme, absolute power! There is nothing beyond—there is nothing greater."

Then Peter, who was watching her closely, caught another gleam in her eyes, and he began to understand. He had seen it before amongst a certain type of her countrywomen—the greed of money. He looked at her jewels, and he remembered that, for an ambassador, her husband was reputed to be a poor man. The cloud of misgiving passed away from him; he settled down to the game.

"If money could only buy the desire of one's heart!" he murmured. "Alas!"

His eyes seemed to seek out Monsieur de Lamborne amongst the moving throngs. She laughed softly, and her hand brushed his.

"Money and one other thing, Monsieur le Baron," she whispered in his ear, "can buy the jewels from a crown—can buy even the heart of a woman."

A movement of approaching guests caught them up and parted them for a time. The Baroness

de Grost was at home from ten till one, and her rooms were crowded. Peter found himself drawn on one side a few minutes later by Monsieur de Lamborne himself.

"I have been looking for you, de Grost," the latter declared. "Where can we talk for a moment?"

His host took the ambassador by the arm and led him into a retired corner. Monsieur de Lamborne was a tall, slight man, somewhat cadaverous-looking, with large features, hollow eyes, thin but carefully arranged grey hair, and a pointed grey beard. He wore a frilled shirt, and an eyeglass suspended by a broad, black ribbon hung down upon his chest. His face, as a rule, was imperturbable enough, but he had the air just now of a man greatly disturbed.

"We cannot be overheard here," Peter remarked. "It must be an affair of a few words only, though."

Monsieur de Lamborne wasted no time in preliminaries.

"This afternoon," he said, "I received from my Government papers of immense importance, which I am to hand over to your Foreign Minister at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning."

Peter nodded.

"Well?"

De Lamborne's thin fingers trembled as they played nervously with the ribbon of his eyeglass.

"Listen," he continued, dropping his voice a little. "Bernadine has undertaken to send a copy of their contents to Berlin by to-morrow night's mail."

"How do you know that?"

The ambassador hesitated.

"We, too, have spies at work," he remarked grimly. "Bernadine wrote and sent a messenger with the letter to Berlin. The man's body is drifting down the Channel, but the letter is in my pocket."

"The letter from Bernadine?"

"Yes."

"What does he say?"

"Simply that a verbatim copy of the document in question will be dispatched to Berlin to-morrow evening without fail," replied the ambassador.

"There are no secrets between us," Peter declared, smoothly. "What is the special importance of this document?"

De Lamborne shrugged his shoulders

"Since you ask," he said, "I tell you. You know of the slight coolness which there has been between our respective Governments? Our people have felt that the policy of your Ministers in ex-

pending all their energies and resources in the building of a great fleet, to the utter neglect of your army, is a wholly one-sided arrangement, so far as we are concerned. In the event of a simultaneous attack by Germany upon France and England, you would be utterly powerless to render us any measure of assistance. If Germany should attack England alone, it is the wish of your Government that we should be pledged to occupy Alsace-Lorraine. You, on the other hand, could do nothing for us if Germany's first move were made against France."

Peter was deeply interested, although the matter was no new one to him.

"Go on," he directed. "I am waiting for you to tell me the specific contents of this document."

"The English Government has asked us two questions; first, how many complete army corps we consider she ought to place at our disposal in this eventuality; and, secondly, at what point should we expect them to be concentrated? The dispatch which I received to-night contains the reply to these questions."

"Which Bernadine has promised to forward to Berlin to-morrow night," Peter remarked softly.

De Lamborne nodded.

"You perceive," he said, "the immense im-

portance of the affair. The very existence of that document is almost a *casus belli*."

"At what time did the dispatch arrive," Peter asked, "and what has been its history since?"

"It arrived at six o'clock," the ambassador declared. "It went straight into the inner pocket of my coat; it has not been out of my possession for a single second. Even whilst I talk to you I can feel it."

"And your plans? How are you intending to dispose of it to-night?"

"On my return to the Embassy I shall place it in the safe, lock it up, and remain watching it until morning."

"There doesn't seem to be much chance for Bernadine," Peter remarked.

"But there must be no chance—no chance at all," Monsieur de Lamborne asserted, with a note of passion in his thin voice. "It is incredible, preposterous, that he should even make the attempt. I want you to come home with me and share my vigil. You shall be my witness in case anything happens. We will watch together."

Peter reflected for a moment.

"Bernadine makes few mistakes," he said thoughtfully.

Monsieur de Lamborne passed his hand across his forehead.

"Do I not know it?" he muttered. "In this instance, though, it seems impossible for him to succeed. The time is so short and the conditions so difficult. I may count upon your assistance, Baron?"

Peter drew from his pocket a crumpled piece of paper.

"I received a telegram from headquarters this evening," he said, "with instructions to place myself entirely at your disposal."

"You will return with me, then, to the Embassy?" Monsieur de Lamborne asked eagerly.

Peter did not at once reply. He was standing in one of his characteristic attitudes, his hands clasped behind him, his head a little thrust forward, watching with every appearance of courteous interest the roomful of guests, stationary just now, listening to the performance of a famous violinist. It was, perhaps, by accident that his eyes met those of Madame de Lamborne, but she smiled at him subtly—more, perhaps, with her wonderful eyes than with her lips themselves. She was the centre of a very brilliant group, a most beautiful woman holding court, as was only right and proper, amongst her admirers. Peter sighed.

"No," he said, "I shall not return with you, de Lamborne. I want you to follow my suggestions, if you will."

"But, assuredly——"

"Leave here early and go to your club. Remain there until one, then come to the Embassy. I shall be there awaiting your arrival."

"You mean that you will go there alone? I do not understand," the ambassador protested. "Why should I go to my club? I do not at all understand!"

"Nevertheless, do as I say," Peter insisted. "For the present, excuse me. I must look after my guests."

The music had ceased, there was a movement towards the supper room. Peter offered his arm to Madame de Lamborne, who welcomed him with a brilliant smile. Her husband, although, for a Frenchman, he was by no means of a jealous disposition, was conscious of a vague feeling of uneasiness as he watched them pass out of the room together. A few minutes later he made his excuses to his wife, and, with a reluctance for which he could scarcely account, left the house. There was something in the air, he felt, which he did not understand. He would not have admitted it to himself, but he more than half divined the truth.

The vacant seat in his wife's carriage was filled that night by the Baron de Grost.

At one o'clock precisely Monsieur de Lamborne returned to his house, and found de Grost gazing with obvious respect at the ponderous safe let into the wall.

"A very fine affair—this," he remarked, motioning with his head towards it.

"The best of its kind," Monsieur de Lamborne admitted. "No burglar yet has ever succeeded in opening one of its type. Here is the packet," he added, drawing the document from his pocket. "You shall see me place it in safety."

Peter stretched out his hand and examined the sealed envelope for a moment closely. Then he moved to the writing-table, and, placing it upon the letter scales, made a note of its exact weight. Finally he watched it deposited in the ponderous safe, suggested the word to which the lock was set, and closed the door. Monsieur de Lamborne heaved a sigh of relief.

"I fancy this time," he said, "that our friends at Berlin will be disappointed. Couch or easy-chair, Baron?"

"The couch, if you please," Peter replied, "a

strong cigar, and a long whisky and soda. So! Now for our vigil."

The hours crawled away. Once Peter sat up and listened.

"Any rats about?" he inquired.

The ambassador was indignant.

"I have never heard one in my life," he answered. "This is quite a modern house."

Peter dropped his match-box and stooped to pick it up.

"Any lights on anywhere except in this room?" he asked.

"Certainly not," Monsieur de Lamborne answered. "It is past three o'clock, and every one has gone to bed."

Peter rose and softly unbolted the door. The passage outside was in darkness. He listened intently for a moment, and returned yawning.

"One fancies things," he murmured apologetically.

"For example?" de Lamborne demanded.

Peter shook his head.

"One mistakes," he said. "The nerves become over-sensitive."

The dawn broke, and the awakening hum of the city grew louder and louder. Peter rose and stretched himself.

"Your servants are moving about in the house," he remarked. "I think that we might consider our vigil at an end."

Monsieur de Lamborne rose with alacrity.

"My friend," he said, "I feel that I have made false pretences to you. With the day I have no fear. A thousand pardons for your sleepless night."

"My sleepless night counts for nothing," Peter assured him; "but before I go, would it not be as well that we glance together inside the safe?"

De Lamborne shook out his keys.

"I was about to suggest it," he replied.

The ambassador arranged the combination and pressed the lever. Slowly the great door swung back. The two men peered in.

"Untouched!" de Lamborne exclaimed, a little note of triumph in his tone.

Peter said nothing, but held out his hand.

"Permit me," he interposed.

De Lamborne was conscious of a faint sense of uneasiness. His companion walked across the room and carefully weighed the packet.

"Well?" de Lamborne cried. "Why do you do that? What is wrong?"

Peter turned and faced him.

"My friend," he said, "this is not the same packet."

The ambassador stared at him incredulously.

"This packet can scarcely have gained two ounces in the night," Peter went on. "Besides, the seal is fuller. I have an eye for these details."

De Lamborne leaned against the back of the table. His eyes were a little wild, but he laughed hoarsely.

"We fight, then, against the creatures of another world," he declared. "No human being could have opened that safe last night."

Peter hesitated.

"Monsieur de Lamborne," he said, "the room adjoining is your wife's?"

"It is the salon of madame," the Ambassador admitted.

"What are the electrical appliances doing there?" Peter demanded. "Don't look at me like that, de Lamborne. Remember that I was here before you arrived."

"My wife takes an electric massage every day," Monsieur de Lamborne answered in a hard, unnatural voice. "In what way is Monsieur le Baron concerned in my wife's doings?"

"I think that there need be no answer to that question," Peter said quietly. "It is a greater

tragedy which we have to face. I maintain that your safe was entered from that room. A search will prove it."

"There will be no search there," de Lamborne declared fiercely. "I am the ambassador of France, and my power under this roof is absolute. I say that you shall not cross that threshold."

Peter's expression did not change. Only his hands were suddenly outstretched with a curious gesture—the four fingers were raised, the thumbs depressed. Monsieur de Lamborne collapsed.

"I submit," he muttered. "It is you who are the master. Search where you will."

"Monsieur has arrived?" the woman demanded breathlessly.

The proprietor of the restaurant himself bowed a reply. His client was evidently well known to him.

"Monsieur has ascended some few minutes ago."

The woman drew a little sigh of relief. A vague misgiving had troubled her during the last few hours. She raised her veil as she mounted the narrow staircase which led to the one private room at the Hôtel de Lorraine. Here she was safe; one more exploit accomplished, one more

roll of notes for the hungry fingers of her dressmaker.

She entered, without tapping, the room at the head of the stairs, pushing open the ill-varnished door with its white-curtained top. At first she thought that the little apartment was empty.

"Are you there?" she exclaimed, advancing a few steps.

The figure of a man glided from behind the worn screen close by her side and stood between her and the door.

"Madame!" Peter said, bowing low.

Even then she scarcely realised that she was trapped.

"You!" she cried. "You, Baron! But I do not understand. You have followed me here?"

"On the contrary, madame," he answered; "I have preceded you."

Her colossal vanity triumphed over her natural astuteness. The man had employed spies to watch her! He had lost his head. It was an awkward matter, this, but it was to be arranged. She held out her hands.

"Monsieur," she said, "let me beg you now to go away. If you care to, come and see me this evening. I will explain everything. It is a little family affair which brings me here."

"A family affair, madame, with Bernadine, the enemy of France," Peter declared gravely.

She collapsed miserably, her fingers grasping at the air; the cry which broke from her lips harsh and unnatural. Before he could tell what was happening, she was on her knees before him.

"Spare me!" she begged, trying to seize his hands.

"Madame," Peter answered, "I am not your judge. You will kindly hand over to me the document which you are carrying."

She took it from the bosom of her dress. Peter glanced at it and placed it in his breast-pocket.

"And now?" she faltered.

Peter sighed—she was a very beautiful woman.

"Madame," he said, "the career of a spy is, as you have doubtless sometimes realised, a dangerous one."

"It is finished!" she assured him breathlessly. "Monsieur le Baron, you will keep my secret? Never again, I swear it, will I sin like this. You will not tell my husband?"

"Your husband already knows, madame," was the quiet reply. "Only a few hours ago I proved to him whence had come the leakage of so many of our secrets lately."

She swayed upon her feet.

"He will never forgive me!" she cried.

"There are others," Peter declared, "who forgive more rarely even than husbands."

A sudden illuminating flash of horror told her the truth. She closed her eyes and tried to run from the room.

"I will not be told!" she screamed. "I will not hear. I do not know who you are. I will live a little longer!"

"Madame," Peter said, "the Double Four wages no war with women, save with spies only. The spy has no sex. For the sake of your family, permit me to send you back to your husband's house."

That night two receptions and a dinner party were postponed. All London was sympathising with Monsieur de Lamborne, and a great many women swore never again to take a sleeping draught. Madame de Lamborne lay dead behind the shelter of those drawn blinds, and by her side an empty phial.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

Bernadine, sometimes called the Count von Hern, was lunching at the Savoy with the pretty wife of a Cabinet Minister, who was just sufficiently conscious of the impropriety of her action to render the situation interesting.

"I wish you would tell me, Count von Hern," she said, soon after they had settled down in their places, "why my husband seems to object to you so much. I simply dared not tell him that we were going to lunch together; and, as a rule, he doesn't mind what I do in that way."

Bernadine smiled slowly.

"Ah, well," he remarked, "your husband is a politician and a very cautious man. I dare say he is like some of those others, who believe that because I am a foreigner and live in London, that therefore I am a spy."

"You a spy!" she laughed. "What nonsense!"

"Why nonsense?"

She shrugged her shoulders. She was certainly a very pretty woman, and her black gown set off to its fullest advantage her deep red hair and fair complexion.

"I suppose because I can't imagine you anything of the sort," she declared. "You see, you hunt and play polo, and do everything which the ordinary Englishmen do. Then one meets you everywhere. I think, Count von Hern, that you are much too spoilt, for one thing, to take life seriously."

"You do me an injustice," he murmured.

"Of course," she chattered on, "I don't really know what spies do. One reads about them in these silly stories, but I have never felt sure that as live people they exist at all. Tell me, Count von Hern, what could a foreign spy do in England?"

Bernadine twirled his fair moustache and shrugged his shoulders.

"Indeed, my dear lady," he admitted, "I scarcely know what a spy could do nowadays. A few years ago you English people were all so trusting. Your fortifications, your battleships, not to speak of your country itself, were wholly at the disposal of the enterprising foreigner who

desired to acquire information. The party who governed Great Britain then seemed to have some strange idea that these things made for peace. To-day, however, all that is changed."

"You seem to know something about it," she remarked.

"I am afraid that mine is really only the superficial point of view," he answered; "but I do know that there is a good deal of information which seems absolutely insignificant in itself, for which some foreign countries are willing to pay. For instance, there was a Cabinet Council yesterday, I believe, and someone was going to suggest that a secret but official visit be paid to your new harbour works up at Rosyth. An announcement will probably be made in the papers during the next few days as to whether the visit is to be undertaken or not. Yet there are countries who are willing to pay for knowing even such an insignificant item of news as that a few hours before the rest of the world.

Lady Maxwell laughed.

"Well, I could earn that little sum of money," she declared gaily, "for my husband has just made me cancel a dinner-party for next Thursday because he has to go up to the stupid place."

Bernadine smiled. It was really a very un-

important matter, but he loved to feel, even in his idle moments, that he was not altogether wasting his time.

"I am sorry," he said, "that I am not myself acquainted with one of these mythical personages, that I might return you the value of your marvellous information. If I dared think, however, that it would be in any way acceptable, I could offer you the diversion of a restaurant dinner-party for that night. The Duchess of Castleford has kindly offered to act as hostess for me, and we are all going on to the Gaiety afterwards."

"Delightful!" Lady Maxwell exclaimed. "I should love to come."

Bernadine bowed.

"You have, then, dear lady, fulfilled your destiny," he said. "You have given secret information to a foreign person of mysterious identity, and accepted payment."

Now Bernadine was a man of easy manners and unruffled composure. To the natural *insouciance* of his aristocratic bringing-up he had added the steely reserve of a man moving in the large world, engaged more often than not in some hazardous enterprise. Yet, for once in his life, and in the midst of the idlest of conversations,

he gave himself away so utterly that even this woman with whom he was lunching—a very butterfly lady indeed—could not fail to perceive it. She looked at him in something like astonishment. Without the slightest warning his face had become set in a rigid stare, his eyes were filled with the expression of a man who sees into another world. The healthy colour faded from his cheeks; he was white even to the parted lips; the wine dripped from his raised glass on to the tablecloth.

"Why, whatever is the matter with you?" she demanded. "Is it a ghost that you see?"

Bernadine's effort was superb, but he was too clever to deny the shock.

"A ghost indeed," he answered, "the ghost of a man whom every newspaper in Europe has declared to be dead."

Her eyes followed his. The two people who were being ushered to a seat in their immediate vicinity were certainly of somewhat unusual appearance. The man was tall and thin as a lath, and he wore the clothes of the fashionable world without awkwardness, and yet with the air of one who was wholly unaccustomed to them. His cheek-bones were remarkably high, and receded so quickly towards his pointed chin that

his cheeks were little more than hollows. His eyes were dry and burning, flashing here and there, as though the man himself were continually oppressed by some furtive fear. His thick black hair was short-cropped, his forehead high and intellectual. He was a strange figure indeed in such a gathering, and his companion only served to accentuate the anachronisms of his appearance. She was, above all things, a woman of the moment —fair, almost florid, a little thick-set, with tightly laced yet passable figure. Her eyes were blue, her hair light-coloured. She wore magnificent furs, and as she threw aside her boa she disclosed a mass of jewellery around her neck and upon her bosom, almost barbaric in its profusion and setting.

"What an extraordinary couple!" Lady Maxwell whispered.

Bernadine smiled.

"The man looks as though he had stepped out of the Old Testament," he murmured.

Lady Maxwell's interest was purely feminine, and was riveted now upon the jewellery worn by the woman. Bernadine, under the mask of his habitual indifference, which he had easily reassumed, seemed to be looking away out of the restaurant into the great square of a

half-savage city, looking at that marvellous crowd, numbered by their thousands, even by their hundreds of thousands, of men and women whose arms flashed out toward the snow-hung heavens, whose lips were parted in one chorus of rapturous acclamation; looking beyond them to the tall, emaciated form of the bare-headed priest in his long robes, his wind-tossed hair and wild eyes, standing alone before that multitude in danger of death, or worse, at any moment—their idol, their hero. And again, as the memories came flooding into his brain, the scene passed away, and he saw the bare room, with its whitewashed walls and blocked-up windows; he felt the darkness, lit only by those flickering candles. He saw the white, passion-wrung faces of the men who clustered together around the rude table, waiting; he heard their murmurs; he saw the fear born in their eyes. It was the night when their leader did not come!

Bernadine poured out another glass of wine and drank it slowly. The mists were clearing away now. He was in London, at the Savoy Restaurant, and within a few yards of him sat the man with whose name all Europe once had rung—the man hailed by some as martyr, and loathed by others as the most fiendish Judas

who ever drew breath. Bernadine was not concerned with the moral side of this strange encounter. How best to use his knowledge of this man's identity was the question which beat upon his brain. What use could be made of him, what profit for his country and himself? And then a fear—a sudden, startling fear. Little profit, perhaps, to be made, but the danger—the danger of this man alive with such secrets locked in his bosom! The thought itself was terrifying, and even as he realised it a significant thing happened—he caught the eye of the Baron de Grost, lunching alone at a small table just inside the restaurant.

"You are not at all amusing," his guest declared. "It is nearly five minutes since you have spoken."

"You, too, have been absorbed," he reminded her.

"It is that woman's jewels," she admitted. "I never saw anything more wonderful. The people are not English, of course. I wonder where they come from."

"One of the Eastern countries, without a doubt," he replied carelessly.

Lady Maxwell sighed.

"He is a peculiar-looking man," she said, "but one could put up with a good deal for jewels

like that. What are you doing this afternoon—picture galleries or your club ? "

" Neither, unfortunately," Bernadine answered. " I have promised to go with a friend to look at some polo ponies."

" Do you know," she remarked, " that we have never been to see those Japanese prints yet ? "

" The gallery is closed until Monday," he assured her, falsely. " If you will honour me then, I shall be delighted."

She shrugged her shoulders, but said nothing. She had an idea that she was being dismissed, but Bernadine, without the least appearance of hurry, gave her no opportunity for any further suggestions. He handed her into her automobile, and returned at once into the restaurant. He touched Baron de Grost upon the shoulder.

" My friend the enemy ! " he exclaimed, smiling.

" At your service in either capacity," the baron replied.

Bernadine made a grimace and accepted the chair which de Grost had indicated.

" If I may, I will take my coffee with you," he said. " I am growing old. It does not amuse me so much to lunch with a pretty woman. One has to entertain, and one forgets the serious busi-

ness of lunching. I will take my coffee and cigarette in peace.'

De Grost gave an order to the waiter and leaned back in his chair.

"Now," he suggested, "tell me exactly what it is that has brought you back into the restaurant."

Bernadine shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not the pleasure of this few minutes' conversation with you?" he asked.

The baron carefully selected a cigar and lit it.

"That," he said, "goes well, but there are other things."

"As, for instance?"

De Grost leaned back in his chair and watched the smoke of his cigar curl upwards.

"One talks too much," he remarked. "Before the cards are upon the table it is not wise."

They chatted upon various matters. De Grost himself seemed in no hurry to depart, nor did his companion show any signs of impatience. It was not until the two people whose entrance had had such a remarkable effect upon Bernadine, rose to leave, that the mask was for a moment lifted. De Grost had called for his bill and paid it. The two men strolled out together.

"Baron," Bernadine said suavely, linking his arm through the other man's as they passed into

the foyer, "there are times when candour even amongst enemies becomes an admirable quality."

"Those times, I imagine," de Grost answered grimly, "are rare. Besides, who is to tell the real thing from the false?"

"You do less than justice to your perceptions, my friend," Bernadine declared, smiling.

De Grost merely shrugged his shoulders. Bernadine persisted.

"Come," he continued, "since you doubt me, let me be the first to give you a proof that on this occasion, at any rate, I am candour itself. You had a purpose in lunching at the Savoy to-day. That purpose I have discovered by accident. We are both interested in those people."

The Baron de Grost shook his head slowly.

"Really——" he began.

"Let me finish," Bernadine insisted. "Perhaps when you have heard all that I have to say you may change your attitude. We are interested in the same people, but in different ways. If we both move from opposite directions our friend will vanish. He is clever enough at disappearing, as he has proved before. We do not want the same thing from him, I am convinced of that. Let us move together and make sure that he does not evade us."

"Is it an alliance which you are proposing?" de Grost asked, with a quiet smile.

"Why not?" Bernadine answered. "Enemies have united before to-day against a common foe."

De Grost looked across the palm court to where the two people who formed the subject of their discussion were sitting in a corner, both smoking, both sipping some red-coloured liqueur.

"My dear Bernadine," he said, "I am much too afraid of you to listen any more. You fancy because this man's presence here was an entire surprise to you, and because you find me already on his track, that I know more than you do, and that an alliance with me would be to your advantage. You would try to persuade me that your object with him would not be my object. Listen! I am afraid of you — you are too clever for me. I am going to leave you in sole possession."

De Grost's tone was final and his bow valedictory. Bernadine watched him stroll in a leisurely way through the foyer, exchanging greetings here and there with friends; watched him enter the cloak-room, from which he emerged with his hat and overcoat; watched him step into his automobile and leave the restaurant.

He turned back with a clouded face and threw himself into an easy-chair.

Ten minutes passed uneventfully. People were passing backwards and forwards all the time; but Bernadine, through his half-closed eyes, did little save watch the couple in whom he was so deeply interested. At last the man rose and, with a word of farewell to his companion, came out from the lounge and made his way up the foyer, turning toward the hotel. He walked with quick, nervous strides, glancing now and then restlessly about him. In his eyes, to those who understood, there was the furtive gleam of the hunted man. It was the passing of one who was afraid.

The woman, left to herself, began to look around her with some curiosity. Bernadine, to whom a new idea had occurred, moved his chair nearer to hers, and was rewarded by a glance which certainly betrayed some interest. A swift and unerring judge in such matters, he came to the instant conclusion that she was not unapproachable. He acted upon impulse. Rising to his feet, he approached her and bowed easily, but respectfully.

"Madame," he said, "it is impossible that I am mistaken. I have had the pleasure, have I not, of meeting you in St. Petersburg?"

Her first reception of his coming was reassuring enough. At his mention of St. Petersburg, however, she frowned.

"I do not think so," she answered in French. "You are mistaken. I do not know St. Petersburg."

"Then it was in Paris," Bernadine continued, with conviction. "Madame is Parisian, without a doubt."

She shook her head, smiling.

"I do not think that I remember meeting you, monsieur," she replied doubtfully; "but perhaps——"

She looked up, and her eyes drooped before his. He was certainly a very personable-looking man, and she had spoken to no one for so many months.

"Believe me, madame, I could not possibly be mistaken," Bernadine assured her smoothly. "You are staying here for long?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Heaven knows!" she declared. "My husband he has, I think, what you call the wander fever. For myself, I am tired of it. In Rome we settle down; we stay five days, all seems pleasant, and suddenly my husband's whim carries us away without an hour's notice. The same thing at Monte Carlo; the same at Paris. Who

can tell what will happen here? To tell you the truth, monsieur," she added, a little archly, "I think that if he were to come back at this moment we should probably leave England to-night."

"Your husband is very jealous?" Bernadine whispered softly.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Partly jealous and partly he has the most terrible distaste for acquaintances. He will not speak to strangers himself, or suffer me to do so. It is sometimes—oh! it is sometimes very *triste!*"

"Madame has my sympathy," Bernadine assured her. "It is an impossible life—this. No husband should be so exacting."

She looked at him with her round blue eyes, a touch of added colour in her cheeks.

"If one could but cure him!" she murmured.

"I would ask your permission to sit down," Bernadine remarked, "but I fear to intrude. You are afraid, perhaps, that your husband may return?"

She shook her head.

"It will be better that you do not stay," she declared. "For a moment or two he is engaged. He has an appointment in his room with a gentleman, but one never knows how long he may be."

"You have friends in London, then?" Bernadine remarked thoughtfully.

"Of my husband's affairs," the woman said, "there is no one so ignorant as I. Yet since we left our own country this is the first time I have known him willingly speak to a soul."

"Your own country!" Bernadine repeated softly. "That was Russia, of course? Your husband's nationality is very apparent."

The woman looked annoyed with herself. She remained silent.

"May I not hope," Bernadine begged, "that you will give me the pleasure of meeting you again?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"He does not leave me," she replied. "I am not alone for five minutes during the day."

Bernadine scribbled the name by which he was known in that locality, on a card, and passed it to her.

"I have rooms in St. James's Street, quite close to here," he said. "If you could come and have tea with me to-day or to-morrow it would give me the utmost pleasure."

She took the card and crumpled it in her hand. All the time, though, she shook her head.

"Monsieur is very kind," she answered. "I

am afraid—I do not think that it would be possible. And now, if you please, you must go away. I am terrified lest my husband should return."

Bernadine bent low in a parting salute.

"Madame," he pleaded, "you will come?"

Bernadine was a handsome man, and he knew well enough how to use his soft and extraordinarily musical voice. He knew very well as he retired that somehow or other she would accept his invitation. Even then he felt dissatisfied and ill at ease as he left the place. He had made a little progress; but, after all, was it worth while? Supposing that the man with whom her husband was even at this moment closeted was the Baron de Grost! He called a taxi-cab and drove at once to the Embassy of his country.

* * * * * *

Even at this moment de Grost and the Russian —Paul Hagon he called himself—were standing face to face in the latter's sitting-room. No conventional greetings of any sort had been exchanged. De Grost had scarcely closed the door behind him before Hagon addressed him breathlessly, almost fiercely.

"Who are you, sir?" he demanded. "And what do you want with me?"

"You had my letter?" de Grost inquired.

"I had your letter," the other admitted. "It told me nothing. You speak of business. What business have I with any here?"

"My business is soon told," de Grost replied; "but in the first place, I beg that you will not unnecessarily alarm yourself. There is, believe me, no need for it—no need whatever, although, to prevent misunderstandings, I may as well tell you at once that I am perfectly well aware who it is that I am addressing."

Hagon collapsed into a chair. He buried his face in his hands and groaned.

"I am not here necessarily as an enemy," de Grost continued. "You have very excellent reasons, I make no doubt, for remaining unknown in this city, or wherever you may be. As yet, let me assure you, your identity is not even suspected, except by myself and one other. Those few who believe you alive believe that you are in America. There is no need for anyone to know that Father——"

"Stop!" the man begged piteously. "Stop!"

De Grost bowed.

"I beg your pardon!" he said.

"Now tell me," the man demanded, "what is your price? I have had money. There is not much left. Sophia is extravagant, and travel-

ling costs a great deal. But why do I weary you with these things?" he added. "Let me know what I have to pay for your silence."

"I am not a blackmailer," de Grost answered sternly. "I am myself a wealthy man. I ask from you nothing in money; I ask you nothing in that way at all. A few words of information, and a certain paper which I believe you have in your possession, is all that I require."

"Information?" Hagon repeated, shivering.

"What I ask," de Grost declared, "is really a matter of justice. At the time when you were the idol of all Russia and the leader of the great revolutionary party, you received funds from abroad."

"I accounted for them," Hagon muttered. "Up to a certain point I accounted for everything."

"You received funds from the Government of a European Power," de Grost continued—"funds to be applied towards developing the revolution. I want the name of that Power, and proof of what I say."

Hagon remained motionless for a moment. He had seated himself at the table, his head resting upon his hand, and his face turned away from de Grost.

"You are a politician, then?" he asked slowly.

"I am a politician," de Grost admitted. "I represent a great secret power which has sprung into existence during the last few years. Our aim, at present, is to bring closer together your country and Great Britain. Russia hesitates because an actual *rapprochement* with us is equivalent to a permanent estrangement with Germany."

Hagon nodded.

"I understand," he said, in a low tone. "I have finished with politics. I have nothing to say to you."

"I trust," de Grost persisted suavely, "that you will be better advised."

Hagon turned round and faced him.

"Sir," he demanded, "do you believe that I am afraid of death?"

De Grost looked at him steadfastly.

"No," he answered. "You have proved the contrary."

"If my identity is discovered," Hagon continued, "I have the means of instant death at hand. I do not use it because of my love for the one person who links me to this world. For her sake I live, and for her sake I bear always the memory of the shameful past. Publish my name

and whereabouts if you will. I promise you that I will make the tragedy complete. But, for the rest, I refuse to pay your price. A great Power trusted me, and, whatever their motives may have been, their money came very near indeed to freeing my people. I have nothing more to say to you, sir."

The Baron de Grost was taken aback. He had scarcely contemplated refusal.

"You must understand," he explained, "that this is not a personal matter. Even if I myself would spare you, those who are more powerful than I will strike. The society to which I belong does not tolerate failure. I am empowered even to offer you their protection, if you will give me the information for which I ask."

Hagon rose to his feet, and before de Grost could foresee his purpose, had rung the bell.

"My decision is unchanging," he said. "You can pull down the roof upon my head, but I carry next my heart an instant and an unfailing means of escape."

A waiter stood in the doorway.

"You will take this gentleman to the lift," Hagon directed.

There was once more a touch in his manner of that half-divine authority which had thrilled

the great multitudes of his believers. De Grost was forced to admit defeat.

"Not defeat," he said to himself, as he followed the man to the lift; "only a check."

Nevertheless, it was a serious check. He could not for the moment see his way farther. Arrived at his house, he followed his usual custom, and made his way at once to his wife's rooms. Violet was resting upon a sofa, but laid down her book at his entrance.

"Violet," he declared, "I have come for your advice."

"He refuses, then?" she asked eagerly.

"Absolutely," de Grost assured her. "What am I to do? Bernadine is already upon the scent. He saw him at the Savoy to-day and recognised him."

"Has Bernadine approached him yet?" Violet inquired.

"Not yet," her husband answered. "He is half afraid to move. I think he realises, or will do very soon, how serious this man's existence may be for Germany."

Violet was thoughtful for several moments; then she looked up.

"Bernadine will try the woman," she asserted. "You say that Hagon is infatuated?"

"Blindly," de Grost replied. "He scarcely lets her out of his sight."

"Your people watch Bernadine?"

"Always."

"Very well, then," Violet went on, "you will find that he will attempt an intrigue with the woman. The rest should be easy for you."

De Grost sighed as he bent over his wife.

"My dear," he said, "there is no subtlety like that of a woman."

Bernadine's instinct had not deceived him, and the following afternoon his servant, who had already received orders, silently ushered Madame Hagon into his apartments. She was wrapped in magnificent sables and heavily veiled. Bernadine saw at once that she was very nervous and wholly terrified. He welcomed her in as matter-of-fact a manner as possible."

"Madame," he declared, "this is quite charming of you! You must sit in my easy-chair here, and my man shall bring us some tea. I drink mine always after the fashion of your country, with lemon, but I doubt whether we make it so well. Won't you unfasten your jacket? I am afraid my rooms are rather warm."

Madame had collected herself, but it was quite

obvious that she was unused to adventures of this sort. Her hand, when he took it, trembled, and more than once she glanced furtively toward the door.

"Yes, I have come," she murmured. "I do not know why. It is not right for me to come; yet there are times when I am weary—times when Paul seems fierce, and when I am terrified. Sometimes I even wish that I were back——"

"Your husband seems very highly strung," Bernadine remarked. "He has doubtless led an exciting life."

"As to that," she replied, gazing around her now, and gradually becoming more at her ease, "I know but little. He was a student professor at Moschaume when I met him. I think that he was at one of the universities in St. Petersburg."

Bernadine glanced at her covertly. It came to him as an inspiration that the woman did not know the truth.

"You are from Russia, then, after all," he said, smiling. "I felt sure of it."

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly. "Paul is so queer in these things. He will not have me talk of it. He prefers that we are taken for French people. Indeed," she went on, "it is not I who desire to think too much of Russia. It is not a

year since my father was killed in the riots, and two of my brothers were sent to Siberia."

Bernadine was deeply interested.

"They were amongst the revolutionaries?"

She nodded.

"Yes," she answered.

"And your husband?"

"He, too, was with them in sympathy. Secretly, too, I believe that he worked amongst them; only he had to be careful. You see, his position at the college made it difficult."

Bernadine looked into the woman's eyes, and he knew then that she was speaking the truth. This man was indeed a great master; he had kept her in ignorance.

"Always," Bernadine said, a few minutes later, as he passed her tea, "I read with the deepest interest of the people's movement in Russia. Tell me what became eventually of their great leader—the wonderful Father Paul."

She set down her cup untasted, and her blue eyes flashed with a fire which turned them almost to the colour of steel.

"Wonderful, indeed!" she exclaimed. "Wonderful Judas! It was he who wrecked the cause. It was he who sold the lives and liberty of all of us for gold."

"I heard a rumour of that," Bernadine remarked, "but I never believed it."

"It was true," she declared passionately.

"And where is he now?" Bernadine asked.

"Dead!" she answered fiercely. "Torn to pieces, we believe, one night in a house near Moscow. May it be so!"

She was silent for a moment, as though engaged in prayer. Bernadine spoke no more of these things. He talked to her kindly, keeping up always his rôle of respectful, but hopeful, admirer.

"You will come again soon?" he begged, when at last she insisted upon going.

She hesitated.

"It is so difficult," she murmured. "If my husband knew——"

Bernadine laughed and touched her fingers caressingly.

"Need one tell him?" he whispered. "You see, I trust you. I pray that you will come."

Bernadine was a man rarely moved towards emotion of any sort; yet even he was conscious of a certain sense of excitement as he stood looking out upon the Embankment from the windows of Paul Hagon's sitting-room a few days later.

Madame was sitting on the settee. It was for her answer to a question that he waited.

"Monsieur," she said at last, turning slowly towards him, "it must be 'No.' Indeed I am sorry, for you have been very charming to me, and without you I should have been dull. But to come to your rooms and dine alone to-night, it is impossible."

"Your husband cannot return before the morning," Bernadine reminded her.

"It makes no difference," she answered. "Paul is sometimes fierce and rough, but he is generous, and all his life he has worshipped me. He behaves strangely at times, but I know that he cares—all the time more, perhaps, than I deserve."

"And there is no one else." Bernadine asked softly, "who can claim even the smallest place in your heart?"

"Monsieur," the woman begged, "you must not ask me that. I think that you had better go away."

Bernadine stood quite still for several moments. It was the climax towards which he had steadfastly guided the course of this mild intrigue.

"Madame," he declared, "You must not send me away! You shall not!"

She held out her hand.

"Then you must not ask impossible things," she answered.

Then Bernadine took the plunge. He became suddenly very grave.

"Sophia," he said, "I am keeping a great secret from you, and I can do it no longer. When you speak to me of your husband you drive me mad. If I believed that really you loved him, I would go away and leave it to chance whether or not you ever discovered the truth. As it is——"

"Well?" she interposed breathlessly.

"As it is," he continued, "I am going to tell you now. Your husband has deceived you; he is deceiving you every moment."

She looked at him incredulously.

"You mean that there is another woman?"

Bernadine shook his head.

"Worse than that," he answered. "Your husband stole even your love under false pretences. You think that his life is a strange one; that his nerves have broken down; that he flies from place to place for distraction, for change of scene. It is not so. He left Rome, he left Nice, he left Paris for one and the same reason. He left because he went in peril of his life. I know little of your history, but I know as much as this: If ever a

man deserved the fate from which he flees, your husband deserves it!"

"You are mad!" she faltered.

"No, I am sane," he went on. "It is you who are mad, not to have understood. Your husband goes ever in fear of his life. His real name is one branded with ignominy throughout the world. The man whom you have married, to whom you are so scrupulously faithful, is the man who sent your father to death and your brothers to Siberia."

"Father Paul!" she screamed.

"You have lived with him; you are his wife!" Bernadine declared.

The colour had left her cheeks; her eyes, with their pencilled brows, were fixed in an almost ghastly stare; her breath was coming in uneven gasps. She looked at him in silent terror.

"It is not true!" she cried at last. "It cannot be true!"

"Sophia," he said, "you can prove it for yourself. I know a little of your husband and his doings. Does he not carry always with him a black box which he will not allow out of his sight?"

"Always," she assented. "How did you

know? By night his hand rests upon it. By day, if he goes out, it is in my charge."

"Fetch it now," Bernadine directed. "I will prove my words."

She did not hesitate for a moment. She disappeared into the inner room and came back after only a few moments' absence, carrying a black leather dispatch-box.

"You have the key?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, looking at him and trembling; "but I dare not—oh, I dare not open it!"

"Sophia," he said, "if my words are not true, I will pass out of your life for ever. I challenge you. If you open that box you will know that your husband is indeed the greatest scoundrel in Europe."

She drew a key from a gold chain around her neck.

"There are two locks," she told him. "The other is a combination, but I know the word. Who's that?"

She started suddenly. There was a loud tapping at the door. Bernadine threw an antimacassar half over the box, but he was too late. De Grost and Hagon had crossed the threshold. The woman stood like some dumb creature. Hagon, trans-

fixed, stood with his eyes riveted upon Bernadine. His face was distorted with passion; he seemed like a man beside himself with fury. De Grost came slowly forward into the middle of the room.

"Count von Hern," he said, "I think that you had better leave."

The woman found words.

"Not yet!" she cried. "Not yet! Paul, listen to me. This man has told me a terrible thing."

The breath seemed to come through Hagon's teeth like a hiss.

"He has told you!"

"Listen to me!" she continued. "It is the truth which you must tell now. He says that you—you are Father Paul!"

Hagon did not hesitate.

"It is true," he admitted.

Then there was a silence—short, but tragical. Hagon seemed suddenly to have collapsed. He was like a man who has just had a stroke. He stood muttering to himself.

"It is the end—this—the end!" he said, in a low tone. "It was for your sake, Sophia! I came to you poor, and you would have nothing to say to me. My love for you burned in my veins like fever. It was for you I did it—for

your sake I sold my honour, the love of my country, the freedom of my brothers. For your sake I risked an awful death. For your sake I have lived like a hunted man, with the cry of the wolves always in my ears, and the fear of death and of eternal torture with me day by day. Have pity on me!"

She was unmoved; her face had lost all expression. No one noticed in that rapt moment that Bernadine had crept from the room.

"It was you," she cried, "who killed my father and sent my brothers into exile!"

"God help me!" he moaned.

She turned to de Grost.

"Take him away with you, please," she said. "I have finished with him!"

"Sophia!" he pleaded.

She leaned across the table and struck him heavily upon the cheek.

"If you stay here," she muttered, "I shall kill you myself!"

That night the body of an unknown foreigner was found in the attic of a cheap lodging-house in Soho. The discovery itself and the verdict at the inquest occupied only a few lines in the morning newspapers. Those few lines were the epitaph

of one who was very nearly a Rienzi. The greater part of his papers de Grost mercifully destroyed, but one in particular he preserved. Within a week the much-delayed treaty was signed at Paris, London and St. Petersburg.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST SHOT

De Grost and his wife were dining together at the corner table in a fashionable but somewhat Bohemian restaurant. Both had been in the humour for reminiscences, and they had outstayed most of their neighbours.

"I wonder what people really think of us," Violet remarked pensively. "I told Lady Amershal, when she asked us to go there this evening, that we always dined together alone somewhere once a week, and she absolutely refused to believe me. 'With your own husband, my dear?' she kept on repeating."

"Her ladyship's tastes are more catholic," the baron declared dryly. "Yet, after all, Violet, the real philosophy of married life demands something of this sort."

Violet smiled and fingered her pearls for a minute.

"What the real philosophy of married life may

be I do not know," she said, "but I am perfectly content with our rendering of it. What a fortunate thing, Peter, with your intensely practical turn of mind, that Nature endowed you with so much sentiment."

De Grost gazed reflectively at the cigarette which he had just selected from his case.

"Well," he remarked, "there have been times when I have cursed myself for a fool, but, on the whole, sentiment keeps many fires burning."

She leaned towards him and dropped her voice a little.

"Tell me," she begged, "do you ever think of the years we spent together in the country? Do you ever regret?"

He smiled thoughtfully.

"It is a hard question, that," he admitted. "There were days there which I loved, but there were days, too, when the restlessness came—days when I longed to hear the hum of the city and to hear men speak whose words were of life and death and the great passions. I am not sure, Violet, whether, after all, it is well for one who has lived to withdraw absolutely from the thrill of life."

She laughed softly but gaily.

"I am with you," she declared, "absolutely.

I think that the fairies must have poured into my blood the joy of living for its own sake. I should be an ungrateful woman indeed if I found anything to complain of nowadays. Yet there is one thing that sometimes troubles me," she went on, after a moment's pause.

"And that?" he asked.

"The danger," she said slowly. "I do not want to lose you, Peter. There are times when I am afraid."

De Grost flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"The days are passing," he remarked, "when men point revolvers at one another, and hire assassins to gain their ends. Now it is more a battle of wits. We play chess on the board of life still, but we play with ivory pieces instead of steel and poison. Our brains direct, and not our muscles."

She sighed.

"It is only the one man of whom I am afraid," she said. "You have outwitted him so often and he does not forgive."

De Grost smiled. It was an immense compliment, this.

"Bernadine," he murmured softly, "otherwise our friend, the Count von Hern."

"Bernadine," she repeated. "All that you say

is true ; but when one fails with modern weapons, one changes the form of attack. Bernadine at heart is a savage."

" The hate of such a man," de Grost remarked complacently, " is worth having. He has had his own way over here for years. He seems to have found the knack of living in a maze of intrigue and remaining untouchable. There were a dozen things before I came upon the scene which ought to have ruined him. Yet there never appeared to be anything to take hold of. The Criminal Investigation Department thought they had no chance. I remember Sir John Dory telling me in disgust that Bernadine was like one of those marvellous criminals one only reads about in fiction, who seem when they pass along the dangerous places to walk upon the air and leave no trace behind."

" Before you came," she said, " he had never known a failure. Do you think that he is a man likely to forgive ? "

" I do not," de Grost answered grimly. " It is a battle, of course—a battle all the time. Yet, Violet, between you and me, if Bernadine were to go, half the savour of life for me would depart with him."

Then there came a serious and wholly unexpected interruption. A man in dark, plain clothes,

still wearing his overcoat and carrying a bowler hat, had been standing in the entrance of the restaurant for a moment or two, looking around the room as though in search of someone. At last he caught the eye of the Baron de Grost and came quickly towards him.

"Charles," the Baron remarked, raising his eyebrows. "I wonder what he wants?"

A sudden cloud had fallen upon their little feast. Violet watched the coming of her husband's servant and the reading of the note which he presented to his master with an anxiety which she could not wholly conceal. The Baron read the note twice, scrutinising a certain part of it closely with the aid of the monocle which he seldom used. Then he folded it up and placed it in the breast-pocket of his coat.

"At what hour did you receive this, Charles?" he asked.

"A messenger brought it in a taxi-cab about ten minutes ago, sir," the man replied. "He said that it was of the utmost importance, and that I had better try and find you."

"A district messenger?"

"A man in ordinary clothes, sir," Charles answered. "He looked like a porter in a warehouse, or something of that sort. I forgot to say

that you were rung up on the telephone three times previously by Mr. Greening."

The Baron nodded.

"You can go," he said. "There is no reply."

The man bowed and retired. De Grost called for his bill.

"Is it anything serious?" Violet inquired.

"No, not exactly serious," he answered. "I do not understand what has happened, but they have sent for me to go—well, where it was agreed that I should not go, except as a matter of urgent necessity."

Violet knew better than to show any signs of disquietude.

"Is it in London?" she asked.

"Certainly," her husband replied. "I shall take a taxi-cab from here. I am sorry, dear, to have one of our evenings disturbed in this manner. I have always done my best to avoid it, but this summons is urgent."

She rose and he wrapped her cloak around her.

"You will drive straight home, won't you?" he begged. "I dare say that I may be back within an hour myself."

"And if not?" she asked in a low tone.

"If not," he replied, "there is nothing to be done."

Violet bit her lip, but as he handed her into the small electric brougham which was waiting she smiled into his face.

"You will come back, and soon, Peter," she declared confidently. "Wherever you go I am sure of that. You see, I have faith in my star which watches over you."

He kissed her fingers and turned away. The commissionaire had already called him a taxi-cab.

"To London Bridge," he ordered after a moment's hesitation, and drove off.

The traffic citywards had long since finished for the day, and he reached his destination within ten minutes of leaving the restaurant. Here he paid the man, and, entering the station, turned to the refreshment-room and ordered a liqueur brandy. While he sipped it he smoked a cigarette and fully re-read in a strong light the note which he had received. The signature especially he pored over for some time. At last, however, he replaced it in his pocket, paid his bill, and, stepping out once more on to the platform, entered a telephone booth. A few minutes later he left the station and, turning to the right, walked slowly as far as Tooley Street. He kept on the right-hand side until he arrived at the spot where the great arches,

with their scanty lights, make a gloomy thoroughfare into Bermondsey. In the shadow of the first of these he paused and looked steadfastly across the street. There were few people passing, and practically no traffic. In front of him was a row of warehouses, all save one of which was wrapped in complete darkness. It was the one where some lights were still burning which de Grost stood and watched.

The lights, such as they were, seemed to illuminate the ground floor only. From his hidden post he could see the shoulders of a man apparently bending over a ledger, diligently writing. At the next window a youth, seated upon a tall stool, was engaged in, presumably, the same avocation. There was nothing about the place in the least mysterious or out-of-the-way. Even the blinds of the offices had been left undrawn. The man and the boy, who were alone visible, seemed, in a sense, to be working under protest. Every now and then the former stopped to yawn, and the latter performed a difficult balancing feat upon his stool. De Grost, having satisfied his curiosity, came presently from his shelter, almost running into the arms of a policeman, who looked at him closely. The Baron, who had an unlighted cigarette in his mouth, stopped to ask for a light, and his

appearance at once set at rest any suspicions the policeman might have had.

"I have a warehouse myself down in these parts," he remarked, as he struck the match, "but I don't allow my people to work as late as that."

He pointed across the way, and the policeman smiled.

"They are very often late there, sir," he said. "It is a Continental wine business, and there's always one or two of them over time."

"It's bad business, all the same," de Grost declared pleasantly. "Good-night, policeman!"

"Good-night, sir!"

De Grost crossed the road diagonally, as though about to take the short cut across London Bridge, but as soon as the policeman was out of sight he retraced his steps to the building which they had been discussing, and, turning the battered brass handle of the door, walked calmly in. On his right and left were counting-houses framed with glass; in front, the cavernous and ugly depths of a gloomy warehouse. He knocked upon the window-pane on the right and passed forward a step or two, as though to enter the office. The boy who had been engaged in the left-hand counting-house came gliding from his place, passed silently behind the visitor, and turned the key of the outer door.

What followed seemed to happen as though by some mysteriously directed force. The figures of men came stealing out from the hidden places. The clerk who had been working so hard at his desk calmly divested himself of a false moustache and wig, and, assuming a more familiar appearance, strolled out into the warehouse. De Grost looked around him with absolutely unruffled composure. He was the centre of a little circle of men, respectably dressed, but every one of them hard-featured, with something in their faces which suggested not the ordinary toiler but the fighting animal—the man who lives by his wits and knows something of danger. On the outskirts of the circle stood Bernadine.

"Really," de Grost declared, removing his cigarette from his mouth for a moment, "this is most unexpected. In the matter of dramatic surprises, my friend Bernadine, you are most certainly in a class by yourself."

Bernadine smiled.

"You will understand, of course," he said, "that this little entertainment is entirely for your amusement—well stage-managed, perhaps, but my supers are not to be taken seriously. Since you are here, Baron, might I ask you to precede me a few steps to the tasting office?"

"By all means," de Grost answered. "It is this way, I believe."

He walked with unconcerned footsteps down the warehouse, on either side of which were great bins and a wilderness of racking, until he came to a small glass-enclosed office built out from the wall. Without hesitation he entered it, and, removing his hat, selected the more comfortable of the two chairs. Bernadine alone of the others followed him inside, closing the door behind. De Grost, who appeared exceedingly comfortable, stretched out his hand and took a small black bottle from a tiny mahogany racking fixed against the wall by his side.

"You will excuse me, my dear Bernadine," he said, "but I see my friend Greening has been tasting a few wines. The 'XX' upon the label here signifies approval. With your permission."

He half filled a glass and pushed the bottle towards Bernadine.

"Greening's taste is unimpeachable," de Grost declared, setting down his glass empty. "No use being a director of a city business, you know, unless one interests oneself personally in it. Greening's judgment is simply marvellous. I have never tasted a more beautiful wine. If the boom in sherry does come," he continued complacently,

"we shall be in an excellent position to deal with it."

Bernadine laughed softly.

"Oh, my friend—Peter Ruff or Baron de Grost, or whatever you may choose to call yourself," he said, "I am indeed wise to have come to the conclusion that you and I are too big to occupy the same little spot on earth!"

De Grost nodded approvingly.

"I was beginning to wonder," he remarked, "whether you would not soon arrive at that decision?"

"Having arrived at it," Bernadine continued, looking intently at his companion, "the logical sequence naturally occurs to you."

"Precisely, my dear Bernadine," de Grost assented. "You say to yourself, no doubt, 'One of us two must go!' Being yourself, you would naturally conclude that it must be me. To tell you the truth, I have been expecting some sort of enterprise of this description for a considerable time."

Bernadine shrugged his shoulders.

"Your expectations," he said, "seem scarcely to have provided you with a safe conduct."

De Grost gazed reflectively into his empty glass.

"You see," he explained, "I am such a lucky

person. Your arrangements to-night, however, are, I perceive, unusually complete."

"I am glad you appreciate them," Bernadine remarked dryly.

"I would not for a moment," de Grost continued, "ask an impertinent or an unnecessary question, but I must confess that I am rather concerned to know the fate of my manager—the gentleman whom you yourself, with the aid of a costumier, so ably represented."

Bernadine sighed.

"Alas!" he said, "your manager was a very obstinate person."

"And my clerk?"

"Incorruptible!" Bernadine declared. "Absolutely incorruptible! I congratulate you, de Grost. Your society is one of the most wonderful upon the face of this earth. I know little about it, but my admiration is very sincere. Their attention to details and the personnel of their staff is almost perfect. I may tell you at once that no sum that could be offered tempted either of these men."

"I am delighted to hear it," de Grost replied, "but I must plead guilty to a little temporary anxiety as to their present whereabouts."

"At this moment," Bernadine remarked, "they

are within a few feet of us ; but, as you are doubtless aware, access to your delightful river is obtainable from these premises. To be frank with you, my dear Baron, we are waiting for the tide to rise."

"So thoughtful about these trifles!" de Grost murmured. "But their present position? They are, I trust, not uncomfortable?"

Bernadine stood up and moved to the farther end of the office. He beckoned his companion to his side and, drawing an electric torch from his pocket, flashed the light into a dark corner behind an immense bin. The forms of a man and a youth bound with ropes and gagged, lay stretched upon the floor. De Grost sighed.

"I am afraid," he said, "that Mr. Greening, at any rate, is most uncomfortable."

Bernadine turned off the light.

"At least, Baron," he declared, "if such extreme measures should become necessary, I can promise you one thing—you shall have a quicker passage into eternity than they."

De Grost resumed his seat.

"Has it really come to that?" he asked. "Will nothing but so crude a proceeding as my absolute removal satisfy you?"

"Nothing else is, I fear, practicable," Bernadine replied, "unless you decide to listen to reason.

Believe me, my dear friend, I shall miss you and our small encounters exceedingly; but, unfortunately, you stand in the way of my career. You are the only man who has persistently baulked me. You have driven me to use against you means which I had grown to look upon as absolutely extinct in the upper circles of our profession."

De Grost peered through the glass walls of the office.

"Eight men, not counting yourself," he remarked, "and my poor manager and his faithful clerk lying bound and helpless. It is heavy odds, Bernadine."

"There is no question of odds, I think," Bernadine answered smoothly. "You are much too clever a person to refuse to admit that you are entirely in my power."

"And as regards terms? I really don't feel in the least anxious to make my final bow with so little notice," de Grost said. "To tell you the truth, I have been finding life quite interesting lately."

Bernadine eyed his prisoner keenly. Such absolute composure was in itself disturbing. He was, for the moment, aware of a slight sensation of uneasiness, which his common sense, however, speedily disposed of.

"There are two ways," he announced, "of dealing with an opponent. There is the old-fashioned one—crude, but, in a sense, eminently satisfactory—which sends him finally to adorn some other sphere."

"I do not like that one," de Grost interrupted. "Get on with the alternative."

"The alternative," Bernadine declared, "is when his capacity for harm can be destroyed."

"That needs a little explanation," de Grost murmured.

"Precisely. For instance, if you were to become absolutely discredited, I think that you would be effectually out of my way. Your people do not forgive."

"Then discredit me, by all means," de Grost begged. "It sounds unpleasant, but I do not like your callous reference to the river."

Bernadine gazed at his ancient opponent for several moments. After all, what was this but the splendid bravado of a beaten man, who is too clever not to recognise defeat?

"I shall require," he said, "your code, the keys of your safe, which contains a great many documents of interest to me, and a free entry into your house."

De Grost drew a bunch of keys reluctantly

from his pocket and laid them upon the desk.

"You will find the code bound in green morocco leather," he announced, "on the left-hand side, underneath the duplicate of a proposed Treaty between Italy and—some other Power. Between ourselves, Bernadine, I really expect that that is what you are after."

Bernadine's eyes glistened.

"What about the safe conduct into your house?" he asked.

De Grost drew his case from his pocket and wrote a few lines on the back of one of his cards.

"This will ensure you entrance there," he said, "and access to my study. If you see my wife, please reassure her as to my absence."

"I shall certainly do so," Bernadine agreed, with a faint smile.

"If I may be pardoned for alluding to a purely personal matter," de Grost continued, "what is to become of me?"

"You will be bound and gagged in the same manner as your manager and his clerk," Bernadine replied smoothly. "I regret the necessity, but you see I can afford to run no risks. At four o'clock in the morning you will be released. It must be part of our agreement that you allow the man who

stays behind the others for the purpose of setting you free, to depart unmolested. I think I know you better than to imagine you would be guilty of such *gaucherie* as an appeal to the police."

"That, unfortunately," de Grost declared, with a little sigh, "is, as you well know, out of the question. You are too clever for me, Bernadine. After all, I shall have to go back to my farm."

Bernadine opened the door and called softly to one of his men. In less than five minutes de Grost was bound hand and foot. Bernadine stepped back and eyed his adversary with an air of ill-disguised triumph.

"I trust, Baron de Grost," he said, "that you will be as comfortable as possible under the circumstances."

De Grost lay quite still. He was powerless to move or speak.

"Immediately," Bernadine continued, "I have presented myself at your house, verified your safe conduct, and helped myself to certain papers which I am exceedingly anxious to obtain," he went on, "I shall telephone here to the man whom I leave in charge, and you will be set at liberty in due course. If, for any reason, I meet with treachery and I do not telephone, you will join Mr. Greening and his young companion in a little—

shall we call it aquatic recreation ? I wish you a pleasant hour and success in the future, Baron—as a farmer."

Bernadine withdrew and whispered his orders to his men. Soon the electric light was turned out and the place was in darkness. The front door was opened and closed ; the group of confederates upon the pavement lit cigarettes and wished one another " Good-night " with the brisk air of tired employees released at last from long labours. Then there was silence.

It was barely eleven o'clock when Bernadine reached the west-end of London. His clothes had become a trifle disarranged, and he called for a few minutes at his rooms in St. James's Street. Afterwards, he walked to Merton House and rang the bell. To the servant who answered it he handed his master's card.

" Will you show me the way to the library ? " he asked. " I have some papers to collect for the Baron de Grost."

The man hesitated. Even with the card in his hand, it seemed a somewhat unusual proceeding.

" Will you step inside, sir ? " he begged. " I should like to show this to the Baroness. The master is exceedingly particular about anyone entering his study."

"Do what you like so long as you do not keep me waiting," Bernadine replied. "Your master's instructions are clear enough."

Violet came down the great staircase a few moments later, still in her dinner-gown, her face a little pale, her eyes luminous. Bernadine smiled as he accepted her eagerly offered hand. She was evidently anxious. A thrill of triumph warmed his blood. Once she had been less kind to him than she seemed now.

"My husband gave you this!" she exclaimed.

"A few minutes ago," Bernadine answered. "He tried to make his instructions as clear as possible. We are jointly interested in a small matter which needs immediate action."

She led the way to the study.

"It seems strange," she remarked, "that you and he should be working together. I thought that you were on opposite sides."

"It is a matter of chance," Bernadine told her. "Your husband is a wise man, Baroness. He knows when to listen to reason."

She threw open the door of the study, which was in darkness.

"If you will wait a moment," she said, closing the door, "I will turn on the electric light."

She touched the knobs in the wall, and the room

was suddenly flooded with illumination. At the further end of the apartment was the great safe. Close to it, in an easy-chair, his evening coat changed for a smoking-jacket, with a neatly tied black tie replacing his crumpled white cravat, the Baron de Grost sat awaiting his guest. A fierce oath broke from Bernadine's lips. He turned toward the door only in time to hear the key turn. Violet tossed it lightly in the air across to her husband.

"My dear Bernadine," the latter remarked, "on the whole, I do not think that this has been one of your successes. My keys, if you please."

Bernadine stood for a moment, his face dark with passion.

"Your keys are here, Baron de Grost," he said, placing them upon the table. "If a bungling amateur may make such a request of a professor, may I inquire how you escaped from your bonds and reached here before me?"

The Baron de Grost smiled.

"Really," he said, "you have only to think for yourself for a moment, my dear Bernadine, and you will understand. In the first place, the letter you sent me signed 'Greening' was clearly a forgery. There was no one else anxious to get me into their power, hence I associated it at once

with you. Naturally, I telephoned to the chief of my staff—I, too, am obliged to employ some of these un-uniformed policemen, my dear Bernadine, as you may be aware. It may interest you to know, further, that there are seven entrances to the warehouse in Tooley Street. Through one of these something like twenty of my men passed and were already concealed in the place when I entered. At another of the doors a motor-car waited for me. If I had chosen to lift my finger at any time, your men would have been overpowered, and I might have had the pleasure of dictating terms to you in my own office. Such a course did not appeal to me. You and I, as you know, dear Count von Hern, conduct our peculiar business under very delicate conditions, and the least thing we either of us desire is notoriety. I managed things, as I thought, for the best. The moment you left the place my men swarmed in. We gently but firmly ejected your guard, released Greening and my clerk, and I passed you myself in Fleet Street, a little more comfortable, I think, in my forty horse-power motor-car than you in that very disreputable hansom. The other details are too absurdly simple; one need not enlarge upon them."

Bernadine shrugged his shoulders.

"I am at your service," he declared calmly.

De Grost laughed.

"My dear fellow," he said, "need I say that you are free to come or go, to take a whisky and soda with me or to depart at once—exactly as you feel inclined? The door was locked only until you restored to me my keys."

He crossed the room, fitted the key in the lock and turned it.

Bernadine drew himself up.

"I will not drink with you," he said. "But some day a reckoning shall come."

He turned to the door. De Grost laid his finger upon the bell.

"Show Count von Hern out," he directed the astonished servant who appeared a moment or two later.

CHAPTER V

THE SEVEN SUPPERS OF ANDREA KORUST

Baron de Grost was enjoying what he had confidently looked forward to as an evening's relaxation, pure and simple. He sat in one of the front rows of the stalls of the Alhambra, his wife by his side and an excellent cigar in his mouth. An hour or so before he had been in telephonic communication with Paris, had spoken with Sograngе himself, and received his assurance of a calm in political and criminal affairs amounting almost to stagnation. It was out of the season, and though his popularity was as great as ever, neither he nor his wife had any social engagements. Hence this evening at a music-hall, which Peter, for his part, was finding thoroughly amusing.

The place was packed—some said owing to the engagement of Andrea Korust and his brother, others to the presence of Mademoiselle Sophie Celaire in her wonderful *Danse des Apaches*. The violinist that night had a great reception. Three

times he was called before the curtain ; three times he was obliged to reiterate his grateful but immutable resolve never to yield to the nightly storm which demanded more from a man who has given of his best. Slim, with the worn face and hollow eyes of a genius, he stood and bowed his thanks, but when he thought the time had arrived he disappeared, and though the house shook for minutes afterwards, nothing could persuade him to reappear.

Afterward came the turn which, notwithstanding the furore caused by Andrea Korust's appearance, was generally considered to be equally responsible for the packed house—the Apache dance of Mademoiselle Sophie Celaire. Peter sat slightly forward in his chair as the curtain went up. For a time he seemed utterly absorbed by the performance. Violet glanced at him once or twice curiously. It began to occur to her that it was not so much the dance as the dancer in whom her husband was interested.

" You have seen her before—this Mademoiselle Celaire ? " she whispered.

Peter nodded.

" Yes," he admitted ; " I have seen her before."

The dance proceeded. It was like many others of its sort, only a little more daring, a little more

finished. Mademoiselle Celaire, in her tight-fitting, shabby black frock, with her wild mass of hair, her flashing eyes, her seductive gestures, was, without doubt, a marvellous person. The Baron watched her every movement with absorbed attention. Even when the curtain went down he forgot to clap. His eyes followed her off the stage. Violet shrugged her shoulders. She was looking very handsome herself in a black velvet dinner gown, and a hat so exceedingly Parisian that no one had had the heart to ask her to remove it.

"My dear Peter," she remarked, reprovingly, "a moderate amount of admiration for that very agile young lady I might, perhaps, be inclined to tolerate, but, having watched you for the last quarter of an hour, I am bound to confess that I am becoming jealous."

"Of Mademoiselle Celaire?" he asked.

"Of Mademoiselle Sophie Celaire."

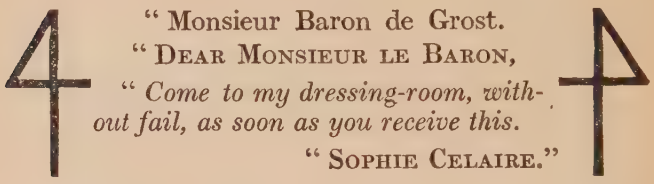
He leaned a little towards her. His lips were parted; he was about to make a statement or a confession. Just then a tall commissionaire leaned over from behind and touched him on the shoulder.

"For Monsieur le Baron de Grost," he announced, handing Peter a note.

Peter glanced towards his wife.

"You permit me?" he murmured, breaking the seal.

Violet shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly. Her husband was already absorbed in the few lines hastily scrawled across the sheet of notepaper which he held in his hand:



"Monsieur Baron de Grost.

"DEAR MONSIEUR LE BARON,

"*Come to my dressing-room, without fail, as soon as you receive this.*

"SOPHIE CELAIRE."

Violet looked over his shoulder.

"The hussy!" she exclaimed, indignantly.

Her husband raised his eyebrows. With his forefinger he merely tapped the two numerals.

"The Double Four!" she gasped

He looked around and nodded. The commissionaire was waiting. Peter took up his silk hat from under the seat.

"If I am detained, dear," he whispered, "you'll make the best of it, won't you? The car will be here, and Frederick will be looking out for you."

"Of course," she answered, cheerfully. "I shall be quite all right."

She nodded brightly, and Peter took his departure. He passed through a door on which was

painted "Private," and through a maze of scenery and stage hands and ballet ladies, by a devious route, to the region of the dressing-rooms. His guide conducted him to the door of one of these and knocked.

"*Entrez, monsieur,*" a shrill feminine voice replied.

Peter entered, and closed the door behind him. The commissionaire remained outside. Mademoiselle Celaire turned to greet her visitor.

"It is a few words I desire with you as quickly as possible, if you please, Monsieur le Baron," she said, advancing towards him. "Listen."

She had brushed out her hair, and it hung from her head straight and a little stiff, almost like the hair of an Indian woman. She had washed her face free of all cosmetics, and her pallor was almost waxen. She wore a dressing-gown of green silk. Her discarded black frock lay upon the floor.

"I am entirely at your service, mademoiselle," Peter answered, bowing. "Continue, if you please."

"You sup with me to-night—you are my guest."

He hesitated.

"I am very much honoured," he murmured. "It is an affair of urgency, then? Mademoiselle will remember that I am not alone here."

She threw out her hands scornfully.

"They told me in Paris that you were a genius!" she exclaimed. "Cannot you feel, then, when a thing is urgent? Do you not know it without being told? You must meet me with a carriage at the stage door in forty minutes. We sup in Hamilton Place with Andrea Korust and his brother."

"With whom?" Peter asked, surprised.

"With the Korust Brothers," she repeated. "I have just been talking to Andrea. He calls himself a Hungarian. Bah! They are as much Hungarian as I am!"

Peter leaned slightly against the table and looked thoughtfully at his companion. He was trying to remember whether he had ever heard anything of these young men.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "the prospect of partaking of any meal in your company is in itself enchanting, but I do not know your friends, the Korust Brothers. Apart from their wonderful music, I do not recollect ever having heard of them before in my life. What excuse have I, then, for accepting their hospitality? Pardon me, too, if I add that you have not as yet spoken as to the urgency of this affair."

She turned from him impatiently, and, throwing herself back into the chair from which she had risen

at his entrance, she began to exchange the thick woollen stockings which she had been wearing upon the stage for others of fine silk.

"Oh, la, la!" she exclaimed. "You are very slow, Monsieur le Baron. It is, perhaps, my stage name which has misled you. I am Marie Lapouse. Does that convey anything to you?"

"A great deal," Peter admitted, quickly. "You stand very high upon the list of my agents whom I may trust."

"Then stay here no longer," she begged, "for my maid waits outside, and I need her services. Go back and make your excuses to your wife. In forty minutes I shall expect you at the stage door."

"An affair of diplomacy, this, or brute force?" he inquired.

"Heaven knows what may happen!" she replied. "To tell you the truth, I do not know myself. Be prepared for anything, but, for Heaven's sake, go now! I can dress no further without my maid, and Andrea Korust may come in at any moment. I do not wish him to find you here."

Peter made his way thoughtfully back to his seat. He explained the situation to his wife so far as he could, and sent her home. Then he waited

until the car returned, smoking a cigarette and trying once more to remember if he had ever heard anything of Andrea Korust or his brother from Sogrange. Punctually at the time stated he was outside the stage door of the music-hall, and a few minutes later Mademoiselle Celaire appeared, a dazzling vision of furs and smiles and jewellery imperfectly concealed. A small crowd pressed around to see the famous Frenchwoman. Peter handed her gravely across the pavement into his waiting motor-car. One or two of the loungers gave vent to a groan of envy at the sight of the diamonds which blazed from her neck and bosom. Peter smiled as he gave the address to his servant, and took his place by the side of his companion.

"They see only the externals, this mob," he remarked. "They picture to themselves, perhaps, a little supper for two. Alas!"

Mademoiselle Celaire laughed at him softly.

"You need not trouble to assume that most disconsolate of expressions, my dear Baron," she assured him. "Your reputation as a man of gallantry is beyond question, but remember that I know you also for the most devoted and loyal of husbands. We waste no time in folly, you and I. It is the business of the Double Four."

Peter was relieved, but his innate politeness forbade his showing it.

"Proceed," he said.

"The Brothers Korust," she went on, leaning towards him, "have a week's engagement at the Alhambra. Their salary is six hundred pounds. They play very beautifully, of course, but I think that it is as much as they are worth."

Peter agreed with her fervently. He had no soul for music.

"They have taken the furnished house belonging to one of your dukes, in Hamilton Place, for which we are bound; taken it, too, at a fabulous rent," Mademoiselle Celaire continued. "They have installed there a chef and a whole retinue of servants. They were here for seven nights; they have issued invitations for seven supper parties."

"Hospitable young men they seem to be," Peter murmured. "I read in one of the stage papers that Andrea is a count in his own country, and that they perform in public only for the love of their music and for the sake of the excitement and travel."

"A paragraph wholly inspired and utterly false," Mademoiselle Celaire declared firmly, sitting a little forward in the car and laying her hand, ablaze with jewels, upon his coat sleeve. "Listen. They

call themselves Hungarians. Bah! I know that they are in touch with a great European Court, both of them, the Court of the country to which they really belong. They have plans, plans and schemes connected with their visit here, which I do not understand. I have done my best with Andrea Korust, but he is not a man to be trusted. I know that there is something more in these seven supper parties than idle hospitality. I and others like me, artistes and musicians, are invited, to give the assemblies a properly Bohemian tone, but there are to be other guests, attracted there, no doubt, because the papers have spoken of these gatherings."

"You have some idea of what it all means, in your mind?" Peter suggested.

"It is too vague to put into words," she declared, shaking her head. "We must both watch. Afterwards we will, if you like, compare notes."

The car drew up before the doors of a handsome house in Hamilton Place. A footman received Peter, and relieved him of his hat and overcoat. A trim maid performed the same office for Mademoiselle Celaire. They met a moment or two later and were ushered into a large drawing-room in which a dozen or two of men and women were already assembled, and from which came a pleasant

murmur of voices and laughter. The apartment was hung with pale green satin ; the furniture was mostly Chippendale, upholstered in the same shade. A magnificent grand piano stood open in a smaller room, just visible beyond. Only one thing seemed strange to the two newly arrived guests. The room was entirely lit with shaded candles, giving a certain mysterious but not unpleasant air of obscurity to the whole suite of apartments. Through the gloom the jewels and eyes of the women seemed to shine with a new brilliance. Slight eccentricities of toilette—for a part of the gathering was distinctly Bohemian—were softened and subdued. The whole effect was somewhat weird, but also picturesque.

Andrea Korust advanced from a little group to meet his guests. Off the stage he seemed at first sight frailer and slighter than ever. His dress coat had been exchanged for a velvet dinner jacket, and his white tie for a drooping black bow. He had a habit of blinking nearly all the time, as though his large brown eyes, which he seldom wholly opened, were weaker than they appeared to be. Nevertheless, when he came to within a few paces of his newly arrived visitors, they shone with plenty of expression. Without any change of countenance, however, he held out his hand.

"Dear Andrea," Mademoiselle Celaire exclaimed, "you permit me that I present to you my dear friend, well known in Paris—alas! many years ago—Monsieur le Baron de Grost. Monsieur le Baron was kind enough to pay his respects to me this evening, and I have induced him to become my escort here."

"It was my good fortune," Peter remarked, smiling, "that I saw Mademoiselle Celaire's name upon the bills this evening—my good fortune, since it has procured for me the honour of an acquaintance with a musician so distinguished."

"You are very kind, Monsieur le Baron," Korust replied.

"You stay here, I regret to hear, a very short time?"

"Alas!" Andrea Korust admitted, "it is so. For myself, I would that it were longer. I find your London so attractive, the people so friendly. They fall in with my whims so charmingly. I have a hatred, you know, of solitude. I like to make acquaintances wherever I go, to have delightful women and interesting men around, to forget that life is not always gay. If I am too much alone I am miserable, and when I am miserable I am in a very bad way indeed. I cannot then make music."

Peter smiled gravely and sympathetically.

"And your brother? Does he, too, share your gregarious instincts?"

Korust paused for a moment before replying. His eyes were quite wide open now. If one could judge from his expression, one would certainly have said that the Baron de Grost's attempts to ingratiate himself with his host were distinctly unsuccessful.

"My brother has exactly opposite instincts," he said slowly. "He finds no pleasure in society. At the sound of a woman's voice he hides."

"He is not here, then?" Peter asked, glancing around.

Andrea Korust shook his head.

"It is doubtful whether he joins us this evening at all," he declared. "My sister, however, is wholly of my disposition. Monsieur le Baron will permit me that I present her."

Peter bowed low before a very handsome young woman with flashing black eyes, and a type of feature undoubtedly belonging to one of the countries of Eastern Europe. She was picturesquely dressed in a gown of flaming red silk, made as though in one piece, without trimming or flounces, and she seemed inclined to bestow upon her new acquaintance all the attention that

he might desire. She took him at once into a corner and seated herself by his side. It was impossible for Peter not to associate the *empressement* of her manner with the few words which Andrea Korust had whispered into her ear at the moment of their introduction.

"So you," she murmured, "are the wonderful Baron de Grost? I have heard of you so often."

"Wonderful!" Peter repeated, with twinkling eyes. "I have never been called that before. I feel that I have no claim whatever to distinction, especially in a gathering like this."

She shrugged her shoulders and glanced carelessly across the room.

"They are well enough," she admitted; "but one wearies of genius on every side of one. Genius is not the best thing in the world to live with, you know. It has whims and fancies. For instance, look at these rooms—the gloom, the obscurity—and I love so much the light."

Peter smiled.

"It is the privilege of genius," he remarked, "to have whims and to indulge in them."

She sighed.

"To do Andrea justice," she said, "it is, perhaps, scarcely a whim that he chooses to receive his guests in semi-darkness. He has weak eyes,

and he is much too vain to wear spectacles. Tell me, you know everyone here ? "

" No one," Peter declared. " Please enlighten me, if you think it necessary. For myself," he added, dropping his voice a little, " I feel that the happiness of my evening is assured without making any further acquaintances."

" But you came as the guest of Mademoiselle Celaire," she reminded him doubtfully, with a faint regretful sigh and a provocative gleam in her eyes.

" I saw Mademoiselle Celaire to-night for the first time for years," Peter replied. " I called to see her in her dressing-room, and she claimed me for an escort this evening. I am, alas ! a very occasional wanderer in the pleasant paths of Bohemia."

" If that is really true," she murmured, " I suppose I must tell you something about the people, or you will feel that you have wasted your opportunity."

" Mademoiselle," Peter whispered.

She held out her hand and laughed into his face.

" No ! " she interrupted. " I shall do my duty. Opposite you is Mademoiselle Drezani, the famous singer at Covent Garden. Do I need to tell you that, I wonder ? Rudolf Maesterling,

the dramatist, stands behind her there in the corner. He is talking to the wonderful Cléo, whom all the world knows. Monsieur Guyer there, he is manager, I believe, of the Alhambra; and talking to him is Marborg, the great pianist. The two ladies talking to my brother are Esther Hammerton, whom, of course, you know by sight. She is leading lady, is she not, at the Hilarity Theatre? The other one is Miss Ransome. They tell me that she is your only really great English actress."

Peter nodded appreciatively.

"It is all most interesting," he declared. "Now, tell me, please, who is the military person with the stiff figure and sallow complexion standing by the door? He seems quite alone."

The girl made a little grimace.

"I suppose I ought to be looking after him," she admitted, rising reluctantly to her feet. "He is a soldier just back from India—a General Nosceworthy, with all sorts of letters after his name. If Mademoiselle Celaire is generous, perhaps we may have a few minutes' conversation later on," she added, with a parting smile.

"Say, rather, if Mademoiselle Korust is kind," de Grost replied, bowing. "It depends upon that only."

He strolled across the room and rejoined Mademoiselle Celaire a few moments later. They stood apart in a corner.

"I should like my supper," Peter declared.

"They wait for one more guest," Mademoiselle Celaire announced.

"One more guest! Do you know who it is?"

"No idea," she answered. "One would imagine that it was someone of importance. Are you any wiser than when you came dear master?" she added under her breath.

"Not a whit," he replied promptly.

She took out her fan and waved it slowly in front of her face.

"Yet you must discover what it all means to-night or not at all," she whispered. "The dear Andrea has intimated to me most delicately that another escort would be more acceptable if I should honour him again."

"That helps," he murmured. "See, our last guest arrives. Ah!"

A tall, spare-looking man was just being announced. They heard his name as Andrea presented him to a companion:

"Colonel Mayson!"

Mademoiselle Celaire saw a gleam in her companion's eyes.

"It is coming—the idea?" she whispered.

"Very vaguely," he admitted.

"Who is this Colonel Mayson?"

"Our only military aeronaut," Peter replied.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Aeronaut!" she repeated doubtfully. "I see nothing in that. Both my own country and Germany are years ahead of poor England in the air. Is it not so?"

Peter smiled and held out his arm.

"See," he said, "supper has been announced. Afterwards Andrea Korust will play to us, and I think that Colonel Mayson and his distinguished brother officer from India will talk. We shall see."

They passed into a room whose existence had suddenly been revealed by the drawing back of some beautiful brocaded curtains. Supper was a delightful meal, charmingly served. Peter, putting everything else out of his head for the moment, thoroughly enjoyed himself, and, remembering his duty as a guest, contributed in no small degree towards the success of the entertainment. He sat between Mademoiselle Celaire and his hostess, both of whom demanded much from him in the way of attention. But he still found time to tell stories which were listened to

by everyone, and exchanged sallies with the gayest. Only Andrea Korust, from his place at the head of the table, glanced occasionally towards his popular guest with a curious, half-hidden expression of distaste and suspicion. The more the Baron de Grost shone, the more uneasy Andrea became. The signal to rise from the meal was given almost abruptly. Mademoiselle Korust hung on to Peter's arm. Her own wishes and her brother's orders seemed to absolutely coincide. She led him towards a retired corner of the music-room. On the way, however, Peter overheard the introduction which he had expected.

"General Noseworthy is just returned from India, Colonel Mayson," Korust said, in his usual quiet, tired tone. "You will, perhaps, find it interesting to talk together a little. As for me, I play because all are polite enough to wish it, but conversation disturbs me not in the least."

Peter passed, smiling, on to the corner pointed out by his companion, which was the darkest and most secluded in the room. He took her fan and gloves, lit her cigarette, and leaned back by her side.

"How does your brother, a stranger to London, find time to make the acquaintance of so many interesting people?" he asked.

"He brought many letters," she replied. "He has friends everywhere."

"I have an idea," Peter remarked, "that an acquaintance of my own, the Count von Hern, spoke to me once about him."

She took her cigarette from her lips and turned her head slightly. Peter's expression was one of amiable reminiscence. His cheeks were a trifle flushed; his appearance was entirely reassuring. She laughed at her brother's caution. She found her companion delightful.

"Yes, the Count von Hern is a friend of my brother's," she admitted carelessly.

"And of yours?" he whispered, his arm slightly pressed against hers.

She laughed at him silently and their eyes met. Decidedly Peter, Baron de Grost, found it hard to break away from his old weakness. Andrea Korust, from his place near the piano, breathed a sigh of relief as he watched. A moment or two later, however, Mademoiselle Korust was obliged to leave her companion to receive a late but unimportant guest, and almost simultaneously Colonel Mayson passed by on his way to the farther end of the apartment. Andrea Korust was bending over the piano to give some instructions to his accompanist. Peter leaned

forward and his face and tone were strangely altered.

"You will find General Noseworthy of the Indian Army a little inquisitive, Colonel," he remarked.

The latter turned sharply round. There was meaning in those few words, without doubt! There was meaning, too, in the still, cold face which seemed to repel his question. He passed on thoughtfully. Mademoiselle Korust, with a gesture of relief, came back and threw herself once more upon the couch.

"We must talk in whispers," she said gaily. "Andrea always declares that he does not mind conversation, but too much noise is, of course, impossible. Besides, Mademoiselle Celaire will not spare you to me for long."

"There is a whole language," he replied, "which was made for whisperers. And as for Mademoiselle Celaire——"

"Well?"

He laughed softly.

"Mademoiselle Celaire is, I think, more your brother's friend than mine," he murmured. "At least I will be generous. He has given me a delightful evening. I resign my claims upon Mademoiselle Celaire."

"It would break your heart," she declared.

His voice sank even below a whisper. Decidedly Peter, Baron de Grost, did not improve! . . .

He rose to leave precisely at the right time, neither too early nor too late. He had spent altogether a most amusing evening. There were one or two little comedies which had diverted him extremely. At the moment of parting, the beautiful eyes of Mademoiselle Korust had been raised to his very earnestly.

"You will come again very soon—to-morrow night?" she had whispered. "Is it necessary that you bring Mademoiselle Celaire?"

"It is altogether unnecessary," Peter replied.

"Let me try and entertain you instead, then."

It was precisely at that instant that Andrea had sent for his sister. Peter watched their brief conversation with much interest and intense amusement. She was being told not to invite him there again and she was rebelling! Without a doubt he had made a conquest! She returned to him flushed, and with a dangerous glitter in her eyes.

"Monsieur le Baron," she said, leading him on one side, "I am ashamed and angry."

"Your brother is annoyed because you have asked me here to-morrow night?" he asked quickly.

"It is so," she confessed. "Indeed, I thank you that you have spared me the task of putting my brother's discourtesy into words. Andrea takes violent fancies like that sometimes. I am ashamed, but what can I do?"

"Nothing, mademoiselle," he admitted, with a sigh. "I obey, of course. Did your brother mention the source of his aversion to me?"

"He is too absurd sometimes," she declared. "One must treat him like a great baby."

"Nevertheless, there must be a reason," Peter persisted, gently.

"He has heard some foolish thing from the Count von Hern," she admitted, reluctantly. "Do not let us think anything more about it. In a few days it will have passed. And meanwhile——"

She paused. He leaned a little towards her. She was looking intently at a ring upon her finger.

"If you would really like to see me," she whispered, "and if you are sure that Mademoiselle Celaire would not object, could you not ask me to tea to-morrow or the next day?"

"To-morrow," Peter insisted, with a becoming show of eagerness. "Shall we say at the Carlton at five?

She hesitated.

"Isn't that rather a public place?" she objected.

"Anywhere else you like."

She was silent for a moment. She seemed to be waiting for some suggestion from him. None came.

"The Carlton at five," she murmured. "I am angry with Andrea. I feel, even, that I could break his wonderful violin in two!"

Peter sighed once more.

"I should like to twist von Hern's neck!" he declared. "Lucky for him that he's in St. Petersburg! Let us forget this unpleasant matter, mademoiselle. The evening has been too delightful for such memories."

Mademoiselle Celaire turned to her escort as soon as they were alone in the car.

"As an escort, let me tell you, my dear Baron," she exclaimed, with some pique, "that you are a miserable failure! For the rest——"

"For the rest, I will admit that I am puzzled," Peter said. "I need to think. I have the glimmerings of an idea—no more."

"You will act? It is an affair for us—for the Double Four?"

"Without a doubt—an affair and a serious one," Peter assured her. "I shall act. Exactly how I cannot say until after to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" she repeated.

"Mademoiselle Korust takes tea with me," he explained.

In a quiet sort of way, the series of supper parties given by Andrea Korust became the talk of London. The most famous dancer in the world broke through her unvarying rule, and night after night thrilled the distinguished little gathering. An opera singer, the "star" of the season, sang; a great genius recited; and Andrea himself gave always of his best. Apart from this wonderful outpouring of talent, Andrea Korust himself seemed to possess the peculiar art of bringing into touch with one another people naturally interested in the same subjects. On the night after the visit of Peter, Baron de Grost, His Grace the Duke of Rosshire was present, the man in whose hands lay the destinies of the British Navy; and, curiously enough, on the same night, a great French writer on naval subjects was present, whom the Duke had never met, and with whom he was delighted to talk for some time apart. On another occasion, the Military Secretary to the French Embassy was able to have a long and instructive chat with a distinguished English general on the subject of the recent manœuvres, and the latter received, in

the strictest confidence, some very interesting information concerning the new type of French guns. On the following evening the greatest of our Colonial statesmen, a red-hot Imperialist, was able to chat about the resources of the Empire with an English politician of similar views, whom he chanced never to have previously met. Altogether these parties seemed to be the means of bringing together a series of most interesting people, interesting not only in themselves, but in their relations to one another. It was noticeable, however, that from this side of his little gatherings Andrea Korust remained wholly apart. He admitted that music and cheerful companionship were the only two things in life he really cared for. Politics or matters of world import seemed to leave him unmoved. If a serious subject of conversation were started at supper-time he was frankly bored, and took no pains to hide the fact. It is certain that whatever interesting topics were alluded to in his presence, he remained entirely outside any understanding of them. Mademoiselle Celaire, who was present most evenings, although with other escorts, was puzzled. She could see nothing whatever to account for the warning which she had received, and had at once passed on, as was her duty, to

the Baron de Grost. She failed, also, to understand the faint but perceptible enlightenment to which Peter himself had admittedly attained after that first evening. Take that important conversation, for instance, between the French military *attaché* and the British general. Without a doubt it was of interest, and especially so to the country which she was sure claimed his allegiance, but it was equally without doubt that Andrea Korust neither overheard a word of that conversation nor betrayed the slightest curiosity concerning it. Mademoiselle Celaire was a clever woman, and she had never felt so hopelessly at fault. Illumination was to come, however—illumination, dramatic and complete.

The seventh and last of these famous supper parties was in full swing. Notwithstanding the shaded candles, which left the faces of the guests a little indistinct, the scene was a brilliant one. Mademoiselle Celaire was wearing her famous diamonds, which shone through the gloom like pin-pricks of fire ; Garda Desmaines, the wonderful Garda, sat next to her host, her bosom and hair on fire with jewels, yet with the most wonderful light of all glowing in her eyes ; a famous actor, who had thrown his proverbial reticence to the winds, kept his immediate neighbours in a state

of semi-hysterical mirth ; the clink of wine-glasses, the laughter of beautiful women, the murmur of cultivated voices, rose and fell through the faint, mysterious gloom. It was a picturesque, a wonderful scene enough. Pale as a marble statue, with the covert smile of the gracious host, Andrea Korust sat at the head of the table, well pleased with his company, as indeed he had the right to be. By his side was a great American statesman, who was travelling round the world, and yet had refused all other invitations of this sort. He had come for the pleasure of meeting the famous Dutch writer and politician, Mr. van Jool. The two were already talking intimately. It was at this point that tragedy, or something like it, intervened. A man's impatient voice was heard in the hall outside, a man's voice which grew louder and louder, more impatient, finally more passionate. People raised their heads to listen. The American statesman, who was, perhaps, the only one to realise exactly what was coming, slipped his hand into his pocket and gripped something cold and hard. Then the door was flung open. An apologetic and much disturbed butler made the announcement which had evidently been demanded of him.

" Mr. von Tassen ! "

A silence followed — breathless — the silence before the bursting of the storm. Mr. von Tassen was the name of the American statesman, and the man who rose slowly from his place by his host's side was the exact double of the man who stood now upon the threshold, gazing in upon the room. The expression of the two alone was different. The new-comer was furiously angry, and looked it. The sham Mr. von Tassen was very much at his ease. It was he who broke the silence, and his voice was curiously free from all trace of emotion. He was looking his double over with an air of professional interest.

"On the whole," he said calmly, "very good. A little stouter, I perceive, and the eyebrows a trifle too regular. Of course, when you make faces at me like that, it is hard to judge of the expression. I can only say that I did the best I could."

"Who the devil are you, masquerading in my name?" the new-comer demanded, with emphasis. "This man is an impostor!" he added, turning to Andrea Korust. "What is he doing at your table?"

Andrea leaned forward, and his face was an evil thing to look upon.

"Who are you?" he hissed out.

The sham Mr. von Tassen turned away for a moment and stooped down. The trick has been done often enough upon the stage, often in less time, but seldom with more effect. The wonderful wig disappeared, the spectacles, the lines in the face, the make-up of diabolical cleverness. With his back to the wall and his fingers playing with something in his pocket, Peter, Baron de Grost smiled upon his host.

"Since you insist upon knowing—the Baron de Grost, at your service!" he announced.

Andrea Korust was, for the moment, speechless. One of the women shrieked. The real Mr. von Tassen looked around him helplessly.

"Will someone be good enough to enlighten me as to the meaning of this?" he begged. "Is it a roast? If so, I only want to catch on. Let me get to the joke, if there is one. If not, I should like a few words of explanation from you, sir," he added, addressing Peter.

"Presently," the latter replied. "In the meantime, let me persuade you that I am not the only impostor here."

He seized a glass of water and dashed it in the face of Mr. van Jool. There was a moment's scuffle, and no more of Mr. van Jool. What emerged was a good deal like the shy Maurice

Korust, who accompanied his brother at the music-hall, but whose distaste for these gatherings had been Andrea's continual lament. The Baron de Grost stepped back once more against the wall. His host was certainly looking dangerous. Mademoiselle Celaire was leaning forward, staring through the gloom with distended eyes. Around the table every head was craned towards the centre of the disturbance. It was Peter again who spoke.

"Let me suggest, Andrea Korust," he said, "that you send your guests—those who are not immediately interested in this affair—into the next room. I will offer Mr. von Tassen then the explanation to which he is entitled."

Andrea Korust staggered to his feet. The man's nerve had failed. He was shaking all over. He pointed to the music-room.

"If you would be so good, ladies and gentlemen!" he begged. "We will follow you immediately."

They went, with obvious reluctance. All their eyes seemed focused upon Peter. He bore their scrutiny with calm cheerfulness. For a moment he had feared Korust, but that moment had passed. A servant, obeying his master's gesture, pulled back the curtains after the departing crowd. The four men were alone.

"Mr. von Tassen," Peter said easily, "you are a man who loves adventures. To-night you experience a new sort of one. Over in your great country such methods as these are laughed at as the cheap device of sensation-mongers. Nevertheless, they exist. To-night is a proof that they exist."

"Get on to facts, sir!" the American admonished. "Before you leave this room, you've got to explain to me what you mean by passing yourself off as Thomas von Tassen."

Peter bowed.

"With much pleasure, Mr. von Tassen," he declared. "For your information, I might tell you that you are not the only person in whose guise I have figured. In fact, I have had quite a busy week. I have been—let me see—I have been Monsieur le Marquis de Beau Kunel on the night when our shy friend, Maurice Korust, was playing the part of General Henderson. I have also been His Grace the Duke of Rosshire when my friend Maurice here was introduced to me as François Defayal, known by name to me as one of the greatest writers on naval matters. A little awkward about the figure I found His Grace, but otherwise I think that I should have passed muster wherever he was known. I have also

passed as Sir William Laureston, on the evening when my rival artiste here sang the praises of Imperial England."

Andrea Korust leaned forward with venomous eyes.

"You mean that it was you who was here last night in Sir William Laureston's place?" he almost shrieked.

"Most certainly," Peter admitted, "but you must remember that, after all, my performances have been no more difficult than those of your shy but accomplished brother. Whenever I took to myself a strange personality I found him there, equally good as to detail, and with his subject always at his finger-tips. We settled that little matter of the canal, didn't we?" Peter remarked cheerfully, laying his hand upon the shoulder of the young man.

They stared at him, these two white-faced brothers, like tiger-cats about to spring. Mr. von Tassen was getting impatient.

"Look here," he protested, "you may be clearing matters up so far as regards Mr. Andrea Korust and his brother, but I'm as much in the fog as ever. Where do I come in?"

"Your pardon, sir!" Peter replied. "I am getting nearer things now. These two young

men—we will not call them hard names—are suffering from an excess of patriotic zeal. They didn't come and sit down on a camp-stool and sketch obsolete forts, as those others of their countrymen do when they want to pose as the bland and really exceedingly ignorant foreigners. They went about the matter with some skill. It occurred to them that it might be interesting to their country to know what Sir William Laureston thought about the strength of the Imperial Navy, and to what extent his country were willing to go in maintaining their allegiance to Great Britain. Then there was the Duke of Rosshire. They thought they'd like to know his views as to the development of the Navy during the next ten years. There was that little matter, too, of the French guns. It would certainly be interesting to them to know what Monsieur le Marquis de Beau Kunel had to say about them. These people were all invited to sit at the hospitable board of our host here. I, however, had an inkling on the first night of what was going on, and I was easily able to persuade those in authority to let me play their several parts. You, sir," Peter added, turning to Mr. von Tassen, "you, sir, floored me. You were not an Englishman, and there was no appeal which I could make. I simply had to

risk you. I counted upon your not turning up. Unfortunately, you did. Fortunately, you are the last guest. This is the seventh supper."

Mr. von Tassen glanced around at the three men and made up his mind.

"What do you call yourself?" he asked Peter.

"The Baron de Grost," Peter replied.

"Then, my friend the Baron de Grost," von Tassen said, "I think that you and I had better get out of this. So I was to talk about Germany with Mr. van Jool, eh?"

"I have already explained your views," Peter declared, with twinkling eyes. "Mr. van Jool was delighted.

Mr. von Tassen shook with laughter.

"Say," he exclaimed, "this is a great story! If you're ready, Baron de Grost, lead the way to where we can get a whisky and soda and a chat."

Mademoiselle Celaire came gliding out to them.

"I am not going to be left here," she whispered. taking Peter's arm.

Peter looked back from the door.

"At any rate, Mr. Andrea Korust," he said, "your first supper was a success. Colonel Mayson was genuine. Our real English military aeronaut

was here, and he has disclosed to you, Maurice Korust, all that he ever knew. Henceforth I presume your great country will dispute with us for the mastery of the air."

"Queer country, this," Mr. von Tassen remarked, pausing on the step to light a cigar. "Seems kind of humdrum after New York, but there's no use talking—things do happen over here anyway!"

CHAPTER VI

THE MISSION OF MAJOR KOSUTH

His host, very fussy as he always was on the morning of his big shoot, came bustling towards de Grost, with a piece of paper in his hand. The party of men had just descended from a large brake and were standing about on the edge of the common, examining cartridges, smoking a last cigarette before the business of the morning, and chatting together over the prospects of the day's sport. In the distance, a cloud of dust indicated the approach of a fast-travelling motor-car.

"My dear Baron," Sir William Bounderby said, "I want you to change your stand to-day. I must have a good man at the far corner as the birds go off my land from there, and Addington was missing them shockingly yesterday. Besides, there is a new man coming on your left, and I know nothing of his shooting—nothing at all!"

Peter smiled.

"Anywhere you choose to put me, Sir William,"

he assented. "They came badly for Addington yesterday, and well for me. However, I'll do my best."

"I wish people wouldn't bring strangers, especially to the one shoot where I'm keen about the bag. I told Portal he could bring his brother-in-law, and he's bringing this foreign fellow instead. Don't suppose he can shoot for nuts! Did you ever hear of him, I wonder? The Count von Hern, he calls himself."

Peter was not on his guard and a little exclamation escaped him.

"Bernadine!" he murmured, softly. "So the game begins once more!"

His interest was unmistakable. It was not only the chill November air which had brought a touch of colour to his cheeks and the light to his eyes.

"You seem pleased," Sir William Bounderby remarked, curiously. "You do know the fellow, then? Friend of yours, perhaps?"

Peter shook his head.

"Oh, yes! I know him, Sir William," he replied, "but I do not think that he would call himself a friend of mine. I know nothing about his shooting except that if he got a chance I think that he would like to shoot me."

Sir William, who was a very literal man, looked grave.

"I am sorry," he said, "if you are likely to find this meeting in any way awkward. I suppose there's nothing against him, eh?" he added, a little nervously. "I invited him purely on the strength of his being a guest of Portal's."

"The Count von Hern comes, I believe," Peter assured his host, "of a distinguished European family. Socially there is nothing whatever against him. We happen to have run up against each other once or twice, that's all. That sort of thing will occur, you know, when the interests of finance touch the border-line of politics."

"You have no objection to meeting him, then?" Sir William asked.

"Not the slightest," Peter replied. "I do not know exactly in what direction the Count von Hern is extending his activities at present, but you will probably find any feeling of annoyance as regards our meeting to-day is entirely on his side."

"I am very glad to hear it," Sir William declared. "I should not like anything to happen to disturb the harmony of your short visit to us."

The motor-car had come to a standstill by this time. From it descended Mr. Portal him-

self, a large neighbouring landowner, a man of culture and travel. With him was Bernadine, in a very correct shooting suit and Tyrolese hat. On the other side of Mr. Portal was a short, thick-set man, with olive complexion, keen black eyes, black moustache and imperial, and sombrely dressed in City clothes. Sir William's eyebrows were slightly raised as he advanced to greet the party. Peter was at once profoundly interested.

Mr. Portal introduced his guests.

"You will forgive me, I am sure, for bringing a spectator, Bounderby," he said. "Major Kosuth, whom I have the honour to present—Major Kosuth, Sir William Bounderby—is high up in the diplomatic service of a people with whom we must feel every sympathy—the young Turks. The Count von Hern, who takes my brother-in-law's place, is probably known to you by name."

Sir William welcomed his visitors cordially.

"You do not shoot, Major Kosuth?" he asked.

"Very seldom," the Turk answered. "I come to-day with my good friend, Count von Hern, as a spectator, if you permit."

"Delighted," Sir William replied. "We will find you a safe place near your friend."

The little party began to move toward the wood. It was just at this moment that Bernadine felt a touch upon his shoulder, and, turning round, found Peter by his side.

"An unexpected pleasure, my dear Count," the latter declared, suavely. "I had no idea that you took an interest in such simple sports."

The manners of the Count von Hern were universally quoted as being almost too perfect. It is a regrettable fact, however, that at that moment he swore—softly, perhaps, but with distinct vehemence. A moment later he was exchanging the most cordial of greetings with his old friend.

"You have the knack, my dear de Grost," he remarked, "of turning up in the most surprising places. I certainly did not know that amongst your many accomplishments was included a love for field sports."

Peter smiled quietly. He was a very fine shot, and knew it.

"One must amuse oneself these days," he said. "There is little else to do."

Bernadine bit his lip.

"My absence from this country, I fear, has robbed you of an occupation."

"It has certainly deprived life of some of its

savour," Peter admitted, blandly. "By the by, will you not present me to your friend? I have the utmost sympathy with the intrepid political party of which he is a member."

The Count von Hern performed the introduction with a reluctance which he wholly failed to conceal. The Turk, however, had been walking on his other side, and his hat was already lifted. Peter had purposely raised his voice.

"It gives me the greatest pleasure, Major Kosuth," Peter said, "to welcome you to this country. In common, I believe, with the majority of my countrymen, I have the utmost respect and admiration for the movement which you represent."

Major Kosuth smiled slowly. His features were heavy and unexpressive. There was something of gloom, however, in the manner of his response.

"You are very kind, Baron," he replied, "and I welcome very much this expression of your interest in my party. I believe that the hearts of your country people are turned towards us in the same manner. I could wish that your country's political sympathies were as easily aroused."

Bernadine intervened promptly.

"Major Kosuth has been here only one day," he remarked lightly. "I tell him that he is a little

too impatient. See, we are approaching the wood. It is as well here to refrain from conversation."

"We will resume it later," Peter said, softly. "I have interests in Turkey, and it would give me great pleasure to have a talk with Major Kosuth."

"Financial interests?" the latter inquired, with some eagerness.

Peter nodded.

"I will explain after the first drive," he said, turning away.

Peter walked rather quickly until he reached a bend in the wood. He overtook his host on the way, and paused for a moment.

"Lend me a loader for half an hour, Sir William," he begged. "I have to send my servant to the village with a telegram."

"With pleasure!" Sir William answered. "There are several to spare. I'll send one to your stand. There's von Hern going the wrong way!" he exclaimed, in a tone of annoyance.

Peter was just in time to stop the whistle from going to his mouth.

"Do me another favour, Sir William," he pleaded. "Give me time to send off my telegram before the Count sees what I'm doing. He's such an inquisitive person," he went on, noticing his

host's look of blank surprise. "Thank you ever so much!"

Peter hurried on to his place. It was round the corner of the wood, and for the moment out of sight of the rest of the party. He tore a sheet from his pocket-book and scribbled out a telegram. His man had disappeared and a substitute taken his place by the time the Count von Hern arrived. The latter was now all amiability. It was hard to believe, from his smiling salutation, that he and the man to whom he waved his hand in so airy a fashion had ever declared war to the death!

The shooting began a few minutes later. Major Kosuth, from a camp stool a few yards behind his friend, watched with somewhat languid interest. He gave one, indeed, the impression that his thoughts were far removed from this simple country party, the main object of whose existence for the present seemed to be the slaying of a certain number of inoffensive birds. He watched the indifferent performance of his friend and the remarkably fine shooting of his neighbour on the left, with the same lack-lustre eye and want of enthusiasm. The beat was scarcely over before Peter, resigning his smoking guns to his loader, lit a cigarette and strolled across to the next stand. He plunged

at once into a conversation with Kosuth, notwithstanding Bernadine's ill-concealed annoyance.

"Major Kosuth," he began, "I sympathise with you. It is a hard task for a man whose mind is centred upon great events to sit still and watch a performance of this sort. Be kind to us all and remember that this represents to us merely a few hours of relaxation. We, too, have our more serious moments."

"You read my thoughts well," Major Kosuth declared. "I do not seek to excuse them. For half a lifetime we Turks have toiled and striven, always in danger of our lives, to help forward those things which have now come to pass. I think that our lives have become tinged with sombreness and apprehension. Now that the first step is achieved, we go forward, still with trepidation. We need friends, Baron de Grost."

"You cannot seriously doubt but that you will find them in this country," Peter remarked. "There has never been a time when the English nation has not sympathised with the cause of liberty."

"It is not the hearts of your people," Major Kosuth said, "which I fear. It is the antics of your politicians. Sympathy is a great thing, and good to have, but Turkey to-day needs more.

The heart of a nation is big, but the number of those in whose hands it remains to give practical expression to its promptings is few.

Bernadine, who had stood as much as he could, seized forcibly upon his friend.

"You must remember our bargain, Kosuth," he insisted—"no politics to-day. Until to-morrow evening we rest. Now I want to introduce you to a very old friend of mine, the Lord-Lieutenant of the county."

The Turk was bustled off, a little unwillingly. Peter watched them with a smile. It was many months since he had felt so keen an interest in life. The coming of Bernadine had steadied his nerves. His gun had come to his shoulder like the piston-rod of an engine. His eye was clear, his nerve still. There was something to be done! Decidedly, there was something to be done! . . .

No man was better informed in current political affairs; but Peter, instead of joining the cheerful afternoon tea party at the close of the day, raked out a file of *The Times* from the library, and studied it carefully in his room. There were one or two items of news concerning which he made pencil notes. He had scarcely finished his task before a servant brought in a dispatch. He opened it with interest and drew pencil and paper

towards him. It was from Paris, and in the code which he had learnt by heart, no written key of which now existed. Carefully he transcribed it on to paper and read it through. It was dated from Paris a few hours back :

" Kosuth left for England yesterday. Envoy from new Turkish Government. Requiring loan one million pounds. Asked for guarantee that it was not for warlike movement against Bulgaria ; declined to give same. Communicated with English Ambassador and informed Kosuth yesterday that neither Government would sanction loan unless undertaking were given that the same was not to be applied for war against Bulgaria. Turkey is under covenant to enter into no financial obligations with any other Power while the interest of former loans remains in abeyance. Kosuth has made two efforts to obtain loan privately, from prominent English financier and French syndicate. Both have declined to treat on representations from Government. Kosuth was expected return direct to Turkey. If, as you say, he is in England with Bernadine, we commend the affair to your utmost vigilance. Germany exceedingly anxious enter into close relations with new Government of Turkey. Fear Kosuth's association with Bernadine proof of bad faith. Have had interview with

Minister for Foreign Affairs, who relies upon our help. French Secret Service at your disposal, if necessary."

Peter read the message three times with the greatest care. He was on the point of destroying it when Violet came into the room. She was wearing a long tea jacket of sheeny silk. Her beautiful hair was most becomingly arranged, her figure as light and girlish as ever. She came into the room humming gaily and swinging a gold purse upon her finger.

"Won three rubbers out of four, Peter," she declared, "and a compliment from the Duchess. Aren't I a pupil to be proud of?"

She stopped short. Her lips formed themselves into the shape of a whistle. She knew very well the signs. Her husband's eyes were kindling, there was a firm set about his lips, the palm of his hand lay flat upon that sheet of paper.

"It was true?" she murmured. "It was Bernadine who was shooting to-day?"

Peter nodded.

"He was on the next stand," he replied.

"Then there is something doing, of course," Violet continued. "My dear Peter, you may be an enigma to other people; to me you have the most expressive countenance I ever saw. You have

had a cable which you have just transcribed. If I had been a few minutes later, I think you would have torn up the result. As it is, I think I have come just in time to hear all about it."

Peter smiled, grimly but fondly. He uncovered the sheet of paper and placed it in her hands.

"So far," he said, "there isn't much to tell you. The Count von Hern turned up this morning with a Major Kosuth, who was one of the leaders of the revolution in Turkey. I wired Paris, and this is the reply."

She read the message through thoughtfully and handed it back. Peter lit a match, and standing over the fireplace, calmly destroyed it.

"A million pounds is not a great sum of money," Violet remarked. "Why could not Kosuth borrow it for his country from a private individual?"

"A million pounds is not a large sum to talk about," Peter replied, "but it is an exceedingly large sum for anyone, even a multi-millionaire, to handle in cash. And Turkey, I gather, wants it at once. Besides, considerations which might be of value from a Government are no security at all as applied to a private individual."

She nodded.

"Do you think that Kosuth means to go

behind the existing treaty and borrow from Germany ? "

Peter shook his head.

" I can't quite believe that," he said. " It would mean the straining of diplomatic relations with both countries. It is out of the question."

" Then where does Bernardine come in ? "

" I do not know," Peter answered.

Violet laughed.

" What is it that you are going to try to find out ? " she asked.

" I am trying to discover who it is that Bernadine and Kosuth are waiting to see," Peter replied. " The worst of it is, I daren't leave here. I shall have to trust to the others."

She glanced at the clock.

" Well, go and dress," she said. " I'm afraid I've a little of your blood in me, after all. Life seems more stirring when Bernadine is on the scene."

The shooting party broke up two days later and Peter and his wife returned at once to town. The former found the reports which were awaiting his arrival disappointing. Bernadine and his guest were not in London, or if they were they had carefully avoided all the usual haunts. Peter

read his reports over again, smoked a very long cigar alone in his study, and finally drove down to the City and called upon his stockbroker, who was also a personal friend. Things were flat in the City, and the latter was glad enough to welcome an important client. He began talking the usual market shop until his visitor stopped him.

"I have come to you, Edwardes, more for information than anything," Peter declared, "although it may mean that I shall need to sell a lot of stock. Can you tell me of any private financier who could raise a loan of a million pounds in cash within the course of a week?"

The stockbroker looked dubious.

"In cash?" he repeated. "Money isn't raised that way, you know. I doubt whether there are many men in the whole city of London who could put up such an amount with only a week's notice."

"But there must be someone," Peter persisted. "Think! It would probably be a firm or a man not obtrusively English. I don't think the Jews would touch it, and a German citizen would be impossible."

"Semi-political, eh?"

Peter nodded.

"It is rather that way," he admitted

"Would your friend the Count von Hern be likely to be concerned in it?"

"Why?" Peter asked, with immovable face.

"Nothing, only I saw him coming out of Heseltine-Wrigge's office the other day," the stockbroker remarked, carelessly.

"And who is Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge?"

"A very wealthy American financier," the stockbroker replied, "not at all an unlikely person for a loan of the sort you mention."

"American citizen?" Peter inquired.

"Without a doubt. Of German descent, I should say, but nothing much left of it in his appearance. He settled over here in a huff, because New York society wouldn't receive his wife."

"I remember all about it," Peter declared. "She was a chorus girl, wasn't she? Nothing particular against her, but the fellow had no tact. Do you know him, Edwardes?"

"Slightly," the stockbroker answered.

"Give me a letter to him" Peter said. "Give my credit as good a leg up as you can. I shall probably go as a borrower."

Mr. Edwardes wrote a few lines and handed them to his client.

"Office is nearly opposite," he remarked. "Wish you luck, whatever your scheme is."

Peter crossed the street and entered the building which his friend had pointed out. He ascended in the lift to the third floor, knocked at the door which bore Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge's name, and almost ran into the arms of a charmingly dressed little lady, who was being shown out by a broad-shouldered, typical American. Peter hastened to apologise.

"I beg your pardon," he said, raising his hat. "I was rather in a hurry, and I quite thought I heard someone say, 'Come in.'"

The lady replied pleasantly. Her companion, who was carrying his hat in his hand, paused reluctantly.

"Did you want to see me?" he asked.

"If you are Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge, I did," Peter admitted. "My name is the Baron de Grost, and I have a letter of introduction to you from Mr. Edwardes."

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge tore open the envelope and glanced through the contents of the note. Peter meanwhile looked at his wife with genuine but respectfully cloaked admiration. The lady obviously returned his interest.

"Why, if you're the Baron de Grost," she exclaimed, "didn't you marry Vi Brown? She used to be at the Gaiety with me years ago."

"I certainly did marry Violet Brown," Peter confessed; "and, if you will allow me to say so, Mrs. Heseltine-Wrigge, I should have recognised you anywhere from your photographs."

"Say, isn't that queer?" the little lady remarked, turning to her husband. "I should love to see Vi again."

"If you will give me your address," Peter declared promptly, "my wife will be delighted to call upon you."

The man looked up from the note.

"Do you want to talk business with me, Baron?" he asked.

"For a few moments only," Peter answered. "I am afraid I am a great nuisance, and, if you wish it, I will come down to the City again."

"That's all right," Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge replied. "Myra won't mind waiting a minute or two. Come through here."

He turned back and led the way into a quiet-looking suite of offices, where one or two clerks were engaged writing at open desks. They all three passed into an inner room.

"Any objection to my wife coming in?" Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge asked. "There's scarcely any place for her out there."

"Delighted," Peter answered.

She glanced at the clock.

"Remember we have to meet the Count von Hern at half-past one at Prince's, Charles," she reminded him.

Her husband nodded. There was nothing in Peter's expression to denote that he had already achieved the first object of his visit.

"I shall not detain you," he said. "Your name has been mentioned to me, Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge, as a financier likely to have a large sum of money at his disposal. I have a scheme which needs money. Providing the security is unexceptionable, are you in a position to do a deal?"

"How much do you want?" Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge asked.

"A million to a million and a half," Peter answered.

"Dollars?"

"Pounds."

It was not Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge's pose to appear surprised. Nevertheless his eyebrows were slightly raised.

"Say, what is this scheme?" he inquired.

"First of all," Peter replied, "I should like to know whether there's any chance of business if I disclose it."

"Not an atom," Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge declared.

"I have just committed myself to the biggest financial transaction of my life, and it will clean me out."

"Then I won't waste your time," Peter announced, rising.

"Sit down for a moment," Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge invited, biting the end off a cigar and passing the box towards Peter. "That's all right. My wife doesn't mind. Say, it strikes me as rather a curious thing that you should come in here and talk about a million and a half when that's just the amount concerned in my other little deal."

Peter smiled.

"As a matter of fact, it isn't at all queer," he answered. "I don't want the money. I came to see whether you were really interested in the other affair—the Turkish loan, you know."

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge withdrew his cigar from his mouth and looked steadily at his visitor.

"Say, Baron," he declared, "you've got a nerve!"

"Not at all," Peter replied. "I'm here as much in your interests as my own."

"Whom do you represent, any way?" Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge inquired.

"A company you never heard of," Peter replied. "Our offices are in the underground places

of the world, and we don't run to brass plates. I am here because I am curious about that loan. Turkey hasn't a shadow of security to offer you. Everything which she can pledge is pledged to guarantee the interest on existing loans to France and England. She is prevented by treaty from borrowing in Germany. If you make a loan without security, Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge, I suppose you understand your position. The loan may be repudiated at any moment."

"Kind of a philanthropist, aren't you?" Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge remarked quietly.

"Not in the least," Peter assured him. "I know there's some tricky work going on, and I suppose I haven't brains enough to get to the bottom of it. That's why I've come blundering in to you, and why, I suppose, you'll be telling the whole story to the Count von Hern at luncheon in an hour's time."

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge smoked in silence for a moment or two.

"This transaction of mine," he said at last, "isn't one I can talk about. I guess I'm on to what you want to know, but I simply can't tell you. The security is unusual, but it's good enough for me."

"It seems so to you beyond a doubt," Peter

replied. "Still, you have to do with a remarkably clever young man in the Count von Hern. I don't want to ask you any questions you feel I ought not to, but I do wish you'd tell me one thing."

"Go right ahead," Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge invited. "Don't be shy."

"What day are you concluding this affair?"

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge scratched his chin for a moment thoughtfully and glanced at his diary.

"Well, I'll risk that," he decided. "A week to-day I hand over the coin."

Peter drew a little breath of relief. A week was an immense time! He rose to his feet.

"That ends our business, then, for the present," he said. "Now I am going to ask both of you a favour. Perhaps I have no right to, but as a man of honour, Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge, you can take it from me that I ask it in your interests as well as my own. Don't tell the Count von Hern of my visit to you."

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge held out his hand.

"That's all right," he declared. "You hear, Myra?"

"I'll be dumb, Baron," she promised. "Say when do you think Vi can come and see me?"

Peter was guilty of snobbery. He considered it quite a justifiable weapon.

"She is at Windsor this afternoon," he remarked.

"What, at the garden party?" Mrs. Heseltine-Wrigge almost shrieked.

Peter nodded.

"I believe there's some fête or other to-morrow," he said; "but we're alone this evening. Why, won't you dine with us, say at the Carlton?"

"We'd love to," the lady assented promptly.

"At eight o'clock," Peter said, taking his leave.

The dinner-party was a great success. Mrs. Heseltine-Wrigge found herself amongst the class of people with whom it was her earnest desire to become acquainted, and her husband was well satisfied to see her keen longing for Society likely to be gratified. The subject of Peter's call at the office in the City was studiously ignored. It was not until the very end of the evening, indeed, that the host of this very agreeable party was rewarded by a single hint. It all came about in the most natural manner. They were speaking of foreign capitals.

"I love Paris," Mrs. Heseltine-Wrigge told her host. "Just adore it. Charles is often there on business, and I always go along."

Peter smiled. There was just a chance here.

"Your husband does not often have to leave London?" he remarked carelessly.

She nodded.

"Not often enough," she declared. "I just love getting about. Last week we had a perfectly horrible trip, though. We started off for Belfast quite unexpectedly, and I hated every minute of it."

Peter smiled inwardly, but he said never a word. His companion was already chattering on about something else. Peter crossed the hall a few minutes later to speak to an acquaintance, slipped out to the telephone booth, and spoke to his servant.

"A bag and a change," he ordered, "at Euston Station at twelve o'clock, in time for the Irish mail. Your mistress will be home as usual."

An hour later the dinner-party broke up. Early the next morning Peter crossed the Irish Channel. He returned the following day, and crossed again within a few hours. In five days the affair was finished, except for the *dénouement.*

Peter ascended in the lift to Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge's office the following Thursday, calm and unruffled as usual, but nevertheless a little exultant. It was barely half an hour ago since he

had become finally prepared for this interview. He was looking forward to it now with feelings of undiluted satisfaction. Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge was in, he was told, and he was at once admitted to his presence. The financier greeted him with a somewhat curious smile.

"Say, this is very nice of you to look me up again!" he exclaimed. "Still worrying about that loan, eh?"

Peter shook his head.

"No, I'm not worrying about that any more," he answered, accepting one of his host's cigars. "The fact of it is that if it were not for me you would be the one who would have to do the worrying."

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge stopped short in the act of lighting his cigar.

"I'm not quite catching on," he remarked. "What's the trouble?"

"There is no trouble, fortunately," Peter replied. "Only a little disappointment for our friends the Count von Hern and Major Kosuth. I have brought you some information which, I think, will put an end to that affair of the loan."

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge sat quite still for a moment. His brows were knitted; he showed no signs of nervousness.

"Go right on," he said.

"The security upon which you were going to advance a million and a half to the Turkish Government," Peter continued, "consisted of two Dreadnoughts and a cruiser, being built to the order of that country by Messrs. Shepherd and Hargreaves at Belfast."

"Quite right," Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge admitted quietly. "I have been up and seen the boats. I have seen the shipbuilders, too."

"Did you happen to mention to the latter," Peter inquired, "that you were advancing money upon those vessels?"

"Certainly not," Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge replied. "Kosuth wouldn't hear of such a thing. If the papers got wind of it there'd be the devil to pay. All the same, I have got an assignment from the Turkish Government."

"Not worth the paper it's written on," Peter declared blandly.

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge rose unsteadily to his feet. He was a strong, silent man, but there was a queer look about his mouth.

"What the devil do you mean?" he demanded.

"Briefly this," Peter explained. "The first payment, when these ships were laid down, was made not by Turkey, but by an emissary of the

German Government, who arranged the whole affair in Constantinople. The second payment was due ten months ago, and not a penny has been paid. Notice was given to the late Government twice and absolutely ignored. According to the charter, therefore, these ships reverted to the shipbuilding company, who retained possession of the first payment as indemnity against loss. The Count von Hern's position was this. He represents the German Government. You were to find a million and a half of money, with the ships as security. You also have a contract from the Count von Hern to take those ships off your hands provided the interest on the loan became overdue, a state of affairs which, I can assure you, would have happened within the next twelve months. Practically, therefore, you were made use of as an independent financier to provide the money with which the Turkish Government, broadly speaking, have sold the ships to Germany. You see, according to the charter of the shipbuilding company, these vessels cannot be sold to any foreign Government without the consent of Downing Street. That is the reason why the affair had to be conducted in such a roundabout manner."

"All this is beyond me," Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge said hoarsely. "I don't care a d——n who

has the ships in the end so long as I get my money!"

"But you would not get your money," Peter pointed out, "because there will be no ships. I have had the shrewdest lawyers in the world at work upon the charter, and there is not the slightest doubt that these vessels are, or rather were, the entire property of Messrs. Shepherd and Hargreaves. To-day they belong to me. I have bought them and paid £200,000 deposit. I can show you the receipt and all the papers."

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge said only one word, but that word was profane.

"I am sorry, of course, that you have lost the business," Peter concluded; "but surely it's better than losing your money?"

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge struck the table fiercely with his fist. There was a grey and unfamiliar look about his face.

"D——n it, the money's gone!" he declared hoarsely. "They changed the day. Kosuth had to go back. I paid it twenty-four hours ago."

Peter whistled softly.

"If only you had trusted me a little more!" he murmured. "I tried to warn you."

Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge snatched up his hat.

"They don't leave till the two-twenty," he

shouted. "We'll catch them at the Milan. If we don't, I'm ruined! By Heaven, I'm ruined!"

They found Major Kosuth in the hall of the hotel. He was wearing a fur coat and otherwise attired for travelling. His luggage was already being piled upon a cab. Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge wasted no words upon him.

"You and I have got to have a talk, right here and now," he declared. "Where's the Count?"

Major Kosuth frowned gloomily.

"I do not understand you," he said shortly. "Our business is concluded, and I am leaving by the two-twenty train."

"You are doing nothing of the sort," the American answered, standing before him, grim and threatening.

The Turk showed no sign of terror. He gripped his silver-headed cane firmly.

"I think," he said, "that there is no one here who will prevent me."

Peter, who saw a fracas imminent, hastily intervened.

"If you will permit me for a moment," he said, "there is a little explanation I should perhaps make to Major Kosuth."

The Turk took a step towards the door.

"I have no time to listen to explanations from

you or anyone," he replied. "My cab is waiting. I depart. If Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge is not satisfied with our transaction, I am sorry, but it is too late to alter anything."

For a moment it seemed as though a struggle between the two men was inevitable. Already people were glancing at them curiously, for Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge came of a primitive school, and he had no intention whatever of letting his man escape. Fortunately at that moment the Count von Hern came up, and Peter at once appealed to him.

"Count," he said, "may I beg for your good offices? My friend Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge here is determined to have a few words with Major Kosuth before he leaves. Surely this is not an unreasonable request when you consider the magnitude of the transaction which has taken place between them! Let me beg of you to persuade Major Kosuth to give us ten minutes. There is plenty of time for the train, and this is not the place for a brawl."

Bernadine smiled. He was not conscious of the slightest feeling of uneasiness. He could conceive many reasons for Peter's intervention, but in his pocket lay the agreement, signed by Kosuth, an accredited envoy of the Turkish Government, besides which he had a further document signed

by Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge, witnessed and stamped, handing over to him the whole of the security for this very complicated loan, on the sole condition that the million and a half, with interest, was forthcoming. His position was completely secure. A little discussion with his old enemy might not be altogether unpleasant!

"It will not take us long, Kosuth, to hear what our friend has to say," he remarked. "We shall be quite quiet in the smoking-room. Let us go in there and dispose of the affair."

The Turk turned unwillingly in the direction indicated. All four men passed through the café, up some stairs, and into the small smoking-room. The room was deserted. Peter led the way to the far corner, and, standing with his elbow leaning upon the mantelpiece, addressed them.

"The position is this," he said. "Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge has parted with a million and a half of his own money, a loan to the Turkish Government, on security which is not worth a snap of the fingers."

"It is a lie!" Major Kosuth exclaimed.

"My dear Baron, you are woefully misinformed," the Count declared.

Peter shook his head slowly.

"No," he said, "I am not misinformed. My

friend here has parted with the money on the security of two battleships and a cruiser, now building in Shepherd and Hargreaves' yard at Belfast. The two battleships and cruiser in question belong to me. I have paid two hundred thousand pounds on account of them, and hold the shipbuilders' receipt."

"You are mad!" Bernadine cried, contemptuously.

Peter shook his head, and continued.

"The battleships were laid down for the Turkish Government, and the money with which to start them was supplied by the Secret Service of Germany. The second instalment was due ten months ago, and has not been paid. The time of grace provided for has expired. The shipbuilders, in accordance with their charter, were consequently at liberty to dispose of the vessels as they thought fit. On the statement of the whole of the facts to the head of the firm, he has parted with these ships to me. I need not say that I have a purchaser within a mile from here. It is a fancy of mine, Count von Hern, that those ships will sail better under the British flag."

There was a moment's tense silence. The face of the Turk was black with anger. Bernadine was trembling with rage.

"This is a tissue of lies!" he exclaimed.

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"The facts are easy enough for you to prove," he said, "and I have here," he added, producing a roll of papers, "copies of the various documents for your inspection. Your scheme, of course, was simple enough. It fell through for this one reason only. A final notice, pressing for the second instalment, and stating the days of grace, was forwarded to Constantinople about the time of the recent political troubles. The late government ignored it. In fairness to Major Kosuth, we will believe that the present government was ignorant of it. But the fact remains that Messrs. Shepherd and Hargreaves became at liberty to sell those vessels, and that I have bought them. You will have to give up that money, Major Kosuth."

"You bet he shall!" the American muttered.

Bernadine leaned a little towards his enemy.

"You must give us a minute or two," he insisted. "We shall not go away, I promise you. Within five minutes you shall hear our decision."

Peter sat down at the writing-table and commenced a letter. Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge mounted guard over the door, and stood there, a grim figure of impatience. Before the five minutes was up, Bernadine crossed the room.

"I congratulate you, Baron," he said, dryly. "You are either an exceedingly lucky person or you are more of a genius than I believed. Kosuth is even now returning his letters of credit to your friend. You are quite right. The loan cannot stand."

"I was sure," Peter answered, "that you would see the matter correctly.

"You and I," Bernadine continued, "know very well that I don't care a fig about Turkey, new or old. The ships, I will admit, I intended to have for my own country. As it is, I wish you joy of them. Before they are completed we may be fighting in the air."

Peter smiled, and, side by side with Bernadine, strolled across to Heseltine-Wrigge, who was buttoning up a pocket-book with trembling fingers.

"Personally," Peter said, "I believe that the days of wars are over."

"That may or may not be," Bernadine answered. "One thing is very certain. Even if the nations remain at peace, there are enmities which strike only deeper as the years pass. I am going to take a drink now with my disappointed friend Kosuth. If I raise my glass 'To the Day!' you will understand."

Peter smiled.

"My friend Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge and I are for the same destination," he replied, pushing open the swing door which led to the bar. "I return your good wishes, Count. I, too, drink 'To the Day!'"

Bernadine and Kosuth left a few minutes afterwards. Mr. Heseltine-Wrigge, who was feeling himself again, watched them depart with ill-concealed triumph.

"Say, you had those fellows on toast, Baron," he declared, admiringly. "I couldn't follow the whole affair, but I can see that you're in for big things sometimes. Remember this. If money counts at any time, I'm with you."

Peter clasped his hand.

"Money always counts," he said—"and friends!"

CHAPTER VII

THE GHOSTS OF HAVANA HARBOUR

"We may now," Sograngе remarked, buttoning up his ulster, and stretching himself out to the full extent of his steamer chair, "consider ourselves at sea. I trust, my friend, that you are feeling quite comfortable."

Peter, Baron de Grost, lying at his ease upon a neighbouring chair, with a pillow behind his head, a huge fur coat around his body, and a rug over his feet, had all the appearance of being very comfortable indeed. His reply, however, was a little short—almost peevish.

"I am comfortable enough for the present, thank you. Heaven knows how long it will last!"

Sograngе waved his arm towards the great uneasy plain of blue sea, the showers of foam leaping into the sunlight, away beyond the disappearing coasts of France.

"Last," he repeated. "For eight days, I

hope. Consider, my dear Baron! What could be more refreshing, more stimulating to our jaded nerves than this? Think of the December fogs you have left behind, the cold, driving rain, the puddles in the street, the grey skies—London, in short, at her ugliest and worst."

"That is all very well," Peter protested; "but I have left several other things behind, too."

"As, for instance?" Sograngе inquired genially.

"My wife," Peter informed him. "Violet objects very much to these abrupt separations. This week, too, I was shooting at Saxthorpe, and I had also several other engagements of a pleasant nature. Besides, I have reached that age when I find it disconcerting to be called out of bed in the middle of the night to answer a long-distance telephone call, and told to embark on an American liner leaving Southampton early the next morning. It may be your idea of a pleasure-trip. It isn't mine."

Sograngе was amused. His smile, however, was hidden. Only the tip of his cigarette was visible.

"Anything else?"

"Nothing much, except that I am always seasick," Peter replied deliberately. "I can feel it coming on now. I wish that fellow would keep

away with his beastly mutton broth. The whole ship seems to smell of it."

Sograngе laughed, softly but without disguise.

"Who said anything about a pleasure-trip?" he demanded.

Peter turned his head.

"You did. You told me when you came on at Cherbourg that you had to go to New York to look after some property there, that things were very quiet in London, and that you hated travelling alone. Therefore you sent for me at a few hours' notice."

"Is that what I told you?" Sograngе murmured.

"Yes! Wasn't it true?" Peter asked, suddenly alert.

"Not a word of it," Sograngе admitted. "It is quite amazing that you should have believed it for a moment."

"I was a fool," Peter confessed. "You see, I was tired and a little cross. Besides, somehow or other, I never associated a trip to America with——"

Sograngе interrupted him, quietly but ruthlessly.

"Lift up the label attached to the chair next to yours. Read it out to me."

Peter took it into his hand and turned it over. A quick exclamation escaped him.

"Great heavens! 'The Count von Hern'—Bernadine!"

"Just so," Sograngе assented. "Nice, clear writing, isn't it?"

Peter sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Do you mean to say that Bernadine is on board?"

Sograngе shook his head.

"By the exercise, my dear Baron," he said, "of a superlative amount of ingenuity, I was able to prevent that misfortune. Now lean over and read the label on the next chair."

Peter obeyed. His manner had acquired a new briskness.

"'La Duchesse della Nermino,'" he announced.

Sograngе nodded.

"Everything just as it should be," he declared. "Change those labels, my friend, as quickly as you can."

Peter's fingers were nimble, and the thing was done in a few seconds.

"So I am to sit next the Spanish lady," he remarked, feeling for his tie.

"Not only that, but you are to make friends with her," Sograngе replied. "You are to be your

captivating self, Baron. The Duchesse is to forget her weakness for hot rooms. She is to develop a taste for sea air and your society."

"Is she," Peter asked anxiously, "old or young?"

Sogrange showed a disposition to fence with the question.

"Not old," he answered; "certainly not old. Fifteen years ago she was considered to be one of the most beautiful women in the world."

"The ladies of Spain," Peter remarked, with a sigh, "are inclined to mature early."

"In some cases," Sogrange assured him, "there are no women in the world who preserve their good looks longer. You shall judge, my friend. Madame comes! How about that sea-sickness now?"

"Gone," Peter declared briskly. "Absolutely a fancy of mine. Never felt better in my life."

An imposing little procession approached along the deck. There was the deck steward leading the way; a very smart French maid carrying a wonderful collection of wraps, cushions, and books; a black-browed, pallid manservant, holding a hot-water bottle in his hand and leading a tiny Pekinese spaniel wrapped in a sealskin coat; and finally Madame la Duchesse. It was so obviously a proces-

sion intended to impress, that neither Peter nor Sograngе thought it worth while to conceal their interest.

The Duchesse, save that she was tall and wrapped in magnificent furs, presented a somewhat mysterious appearance. Her features were entirely obscured by an unusually thick veil of black lace, and the voluminous nature of her outer garments only permitted a suspicion as to her figure, which was, at that time, at once the despair and the triumph of her *corsetière*. With both hands she was holding her fur-lined skirts from contact with the deck, disclosing at the same time remarkably shapely feet encased in trim patent shoes, with plain silver buckles, and a little more black silk stocking than seemed absolutely necessary. The deck steward, after a half-puzzled scrutiny of the labels, let down the chair next to the two men. The Duchesse contemplated her prospective neighbours with some curiosity, mingled with a certain amount of hesitation. It was at that moment that Sograngе, shaking away his rug, rose to his feet.

"Madame la Duchesse permits me to remind her of my existence," he said, bowing low. "It is some years since we met, but I had the honour of a dance at the Palace in Madrid."

She held out her hand at once, yet somehow Peter felt sure that she was thankful for her veil. Her voice was pleasant, and her air the air of a great lady. She spoke French with the soft, sibilant intonation of the Spaniard.

"I remember the occasion perfectly, Marquis," she admitted. "Your sister and I once shared a villa in Mentone."

"I am flattered by your recollection, Duchesse," Sograngе murmured.

"It is a great surprise to meet with you here, though," she continued. "I did not see you at Cherbourg or on the train."

"I motored from Paris," Sograngе explained, "and arrived, contrary to my custom, I must confess, somewhat early. Will you permit that I introduce an acquaintance whom I have been fortunate enough to find on board: Monsieur le Baron de Grost—Madame la Duchesse della Nermino."

Peter was graciously received, and the conversation dealt, for a few moments, with the usual banalities of the voyage. Then followed the business of settling the Duchesse in her place. When she was really installed, and surrounded with all the paraphernalia of a great and fanciful lady, including a handful of long cigarettes, she raised her veil. Peter, who was at the moment engaged

in conversation with her, was a little shocked with the result. Her features were worn, her face dead white, with many signs of the ravages wrought by the constant use of cosmetics. Only her eyes had retained something of their former splendour. These latter were almost violet in colour, deep-set, with dark rims, and were sufficient almost in themselves to make one forget for a moment the less prepossessing details of her appearance. A small library of books was by her side, but after a while she no longer pretended any interest in them. She was a born conversationalist, a creature of her country, entirely and absolutely feminine, to whom the subtle and flattering deference of the other sex was as the breath of life itself. Peter burned his homage upon her altar with a craft which amounted to genius. In less than half an hour Madame la Duchesse was looking many years younger. The vague look of apprehension had passed from her face. Their voices had sunk to a confidential undertone, punctuated often by the music of her laughter. Sograngе, with a murmured word of apology, had slipped away long ago. Decidedly, for an Englishman, Peter was something of a marvel!

Madame la Duchesse moved her head towards the empty chair.

"He is a great friend of yours—the Marquis de

Sogrange ?" she asked, with a certain inflection in her tone which Peter was not slow to notice.

"Indeed, no!" he answered. "A few years ago I was frequently in Paris. I made his acquaintance then, but we have met very seldom since."

"You are not travelling together, then ?" she inquired.

"By no means," Peter assured her. "I recognised him only as he boarded the steamer at Cherbourg."

"He is not a popular man in our world," she remarked. "One speaks of him as a schemer."

"Is there anything left to scheme for in France ?" Peter asked carelessly. "He is, perhaps, a Monarchist ?"

"His ancestry alone would compel a devoted allegiance to Royalism," the Duchesse declared; "but I do not think that he is interested in any of these futile plots to reinstate the House of Orleans. I, Monsieur le Baron, am Spanish."

"I have scarcely lived so far out of the world as to have heard nothing of the Duchesse della Nermino," Peter replied with *empressement*. "The last time I saw you, Duchesse, you were in the suite of the Infanta."

"Like all Englishmen, I see you possess a memory," she said, smiling.

"Duchesse," Peter answered, lowering his voice, "without the memories which one is fortunate enough to collect as one passes along, life would be a dreary place. The most beautiful things in the world cannot remain always with us. It is well, then, that the shadow of them can be recalled to us in the shape of dreams."

Her eyes rewarded him for his gallantry. Peter felt that he was doing very well indeed. He indulged himself in a brief silence. Presently she returned to the subject of Sograngе.

"I think," she remarked, "that of all the men in the world I expected least to see the Marquis de Sograngе on board a steamer bound for New York. What can a man of his type find to amuse him in the New World?"

"One wonders, indeed," Peter assented. "As a matter of fact, I did read in a newspaper a few days ago that he was going to Mexico in connection with some excavations there. He spoke to me of it just now. They seem to have discovered a ruined temple of the Incas, or something of the sort."

The Duchesse breathed what sounded very much like a sigh of relief.

"I had forgotten," she admitted, "that New York itself need not necessarily be his destination."

"For my own part," Peter continued, "it is

quite amazing the interest which the evening papers always take in the movements of one connected ever so slightly with their world. I think that a dozen newspapers have told their readers the exact amount of money I am going to lend or borrow in New York, the stocks I am going to bull or bear, the mines I am going to purchase. My presence on an American steamer is accounted for by the journalists a dozen times over. Yours, Duchesse, if one might say so without appearing over-curious, seems the most inexplicable. What attraction can America possibly have for you ? "

She glanced at him covertly from under her sleepy eyelids. Peter's face was like the face of a child.

" You do not, perhaps, know," she said, " that I was born in Cuba. I lived there, in fact, for many years. I still have estates in the country."

" Indeed ? " he answered. " Are you interested, then, in this reported salvage of the *Maine ?* "

There was a short silence. Peter, who had not been looking at her when he had asked his question, turned his head, surprised at her lack of response. His heart gave a little jump. The Duchesse had all the appearance of a woman on the point of fainting. One hand was holding a scent bottle to her nose, the other, thin and white,

ablaze with emeralds and diamonds, was gripping the side of her chair. Her expression was one of blank terror. Peter felt a shiver chill his own blood at the things he saw in her face. He himself was confused, apologetic, yet absolutely without understanding. His thoughts reverted at first to his own commonplace malady.

"You are ill, Duchesse!" he exclaimed. "You will allow me to call the deck steward? Or perhaps you would prefer your own maid? I have some brandy in this flask."

He had thrown off his rug, but her imperious gesture kept him seated. She was looking at him with an intentness which was almost tragical.

"What made you ask me that question?" she demanded.

His innocence was entirely apparent. Not even Peter could have dissembled so naturally.

"That question?" he repeated, vaguely. "You mean about the *Maine?* It was the idlest chance, Duchesse, I assure you. I saw something about it in the paper yesterday, and it seemed interesting. But if I had had the slightest idea that the subject was distasteful to you I would not have dreamed of mentioning it. Even now—I do not understand——"

She interrupted him. All the time he had been

speaking she had shown signs of recovery. She was smiling now, faintly and with obvious effort, but still smiling.

"It is altogether my own fault, Baron," she admitted graciously. "Please forgive my little fit of emotion. The subject is a very sore one amongst my country-people, you know, and your sudden mention of it upset me. It was very foolish."

"Duchesse, I was a clumsy idiot!" Peter declared penitently. "I deserve that you should be unkind to me for the rest of the voyage."

"I could not afford that," she answered, forcing another smile. "I am relying too much upon you for companionship. Ah! could I trouble you?" she added. "For the moment I need my maid. She passes there."

Peter sprang up and called the young woman, who was slowly pacing the deck. He himself did not at once return to his place. He went instead in search of Sogrange, and found him in his state-room. Sogrange was lying upon a couch, in a silk smoking suit, with a French novel in his hand and an air of contentment which was almost fatuous. He laid down the volume at Peter's entrance.

"Dear Baron," he murmured, "why this haste?

No one is ever in a hurry upon a steamer. Remember that we can't possibly get anywhere in less than eight days, and there is no task in the world, nowadays, which cannot be accomplished in that time. To hurry is a needless waste of tissue, and, to a person of my nervous temperament, exceedingly unpleasant."

Peter sat down on the edge of the bunk.

"I presume you have quite finished?" he said. "If so, listen to me. I am moving in the dark. Is it my fault that I blunder? By the merest accident I have already committed a hideous *faux pas*. You ought to have warned me."

"What do you mean?"

"I have spoken to the Duchesse of the *Maine* disaster."

The eyes of Sograngе gleamed for a moment, but he lay perfectly still.

"Why not?" he asked. "A good many people are talking about it. It is one of the strangest things I have ever heard of, that after all these years they should be trying to salve the wreck."

"It seems worse than strange," Peter declared. "What can be the use of trying to stir up bitter feelings between two nations who have fought

their battles and buried the hatchet ? I call it an an act of insanity."

A bugle rang. Sograngе yawned and sat up.

" Would you mind touching the bell for my servant, Baron," he asked. " Dinner will be served in half an hour. Afterwards, we will talk, you and I."

Peter turned away, not wholly pleased.

" The sooner the better," he grumbled, " or I shall be putting my foot into it again."

After dinner the two men walked on deck together. The night was dark, but fine, with a strong wind blowing from the north-west. The deck steward called their attention to a long line of lights stealing up from the horizon on their starboard side.

" That's the *Lusitania*, sir. She'll be up to us in half an hour."

They leaned over the rail. Soon the blue fires began to play about their masthead. Sograngе watched them thoughtfully.

" If one could only read those messages," he remarked, with a sigh, " it might help us."

Peter knocked the ash from his cigar, and was silent for a time. He was beginning to understand the situation.

" My friend," he said at last, " I have been

doing you an injustice. I have come to the conclusion that you are not keeping me in ignorance of the vital facts connected with our visit to America wilfully. At the present moment you know just a little more, but a very little more, than I do."

"What perception!" Sograngе murmured. "My dear Baron, sometimes you amaze me. You are absolutely right. I have some pieces, and I am convinced that they would form a puzzle the solution of which would be interesting to us; but how or where they fit in I frankly don't know. You have the facts so far."

"Certainly," Peter replied.

"You have heard of Sirdeller?"

"Do you mean *the* Sirdeller?" Peter asked.

"Naturally. I mean the man whose very movements sway the money markets of the world; the man who could, if he chose, ruin any nation, make war impossible; who could, if he had ten more years of life and was allowed to live, draw to himself and his own following the entire wealth of the universe."

"Very eloquent," Peter remarked. "We'll take the rest for granted."

"Then," Sograngе continued, "you have probably also heard of Don Pedro, Prince of

Marsine, one-time Pretender to the throne of Spain ?"

"Quite a striking figure in European politics," Peter assented, quickly. "He is suspected of radical proclivities, and is still, it is rumoured, an active plotter against the existing monarchy."

"Very well," Sograngе said. "Now listen carefully. Four months ago Sirdeller was living at the Golden Villa, near Nice. He was visited more than once by Marsine, introduced by the Count von Hern. The result of those visits was a long series of cablegrams to certain great engineering firms in America. Almost immediately the salvage of the *Maine* was started. It is a matter of common report that the entire cost of these works is being undertaken by Sirdeller."

"Now," Peter murmured, "you are really beginning to interest me."

"This week," Sograngе went on, "it is expected that the result of the salvage works will be made known. That is to say, it is highly possible that the question of whether the *Maine* was blown up from outside or inside will be settled once and for all. This week, mind, Baron. Now see what happens. Sirdeller returns to America. The Count von Hern and Prince Marsine come to America.

The Duchesse della Nermino comes to America. The Duchesse, Sirdeller, and Marsine are upon this steamer. The Count von Hern travels by the *Lusitania* only because it was reported that Sirdeller at the last minute changed his mind, and was travelling by that boat. Mix these things up in your brain—the conjurer's hat, let us call it," Sogrange concluded, laying his hand upon Peter's arm. "Sirdeller, the Duchesse, Von Hern, Marsine, the raising of the *Maine*—mix them up, and what sort of an omelette appears?"

Peter whistled softly.

"No wonder," he said, "that you couldn't make the pieces of the puzzle fit. Tell me more about the Duchesse."

Sogrange considered for a moment.

"The principal thing about her which links her with the present situation," he explained, "is that she was living in Cuba at the time of the *Maine* disaster, married to a rich Cuban."

The affair was suddenly illuminated by the searchlight of romance. Peter, for the first time, saw not the light, but the possibility of it.

"Marsine has been living in Germany, has he not?" he asked.

"He is a personal friend of the Kaiser," Sogrange replied.

They both looked up and listened to the crackling of the electricity above their heads.

"I expect Bernadine is a little annoyed," Peter remarked.

"It isn't pleasant to be out of the party," Sogrange agreed. "Nearly everybody, however, believed at the last moment that Sirdeller had transferred his passage to the *Lusitania*."

"It's going to cost him an awful lot in marconigrams," Peter said. "By the by, wouldn't it have been better for us to have travelled separately, and incognito?"

Sogrange shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Von Hern has at least one man on board," he replied. "I do not think that we could possibly have escaped observation. Besides, I rather imagine that any move we are able to make in this matter must come before we reach Fire Island."

"Have you any theory at all?" Peter asked.

"Not the ghost of a one," Sogrange admitted. "One more fact, though, I forgot to mention. You may find it important. The Duchesse comes entirely against von Hern's wishes. They have been on intimate terms for years, but for some reason or other he was exceedingly anxious that she should not take this voyage. She, on the

other hand, seemed to have some equally strong reason for coming. The most useful piece of advice I could give you would be to cultivate her acquaintance."

"The Duchesse——"

Peter never finished his sentence. His companion drew him suddenly back into the shadow of a lifeboat.

"Look!"

A door had opened from lower down the deck, and a curious little procession was coming towards them. A man, burly and broad-shouldered, who had the air of a professional bully, walked by himself ahead. Two others of similar build walked a few steps behind. And between them a thin, insignificant figure, wrapped in an immense fur coat and using a strong walking-stick, came slowly along the deck. It was like a procession of prison warders guarding a murderer, or perhaps a nerve-wrecked royal personage moving towards the end of his days in the midst of enemies. With halting steps the little old man came shambling along. He looked neither to the left nor to the right. His eyes were fixed and yet unseeing, his features were pale and bony. There was no gleam of life, not even in his stone-cold eyes. Like some machine-made man of a new and physically degenerate age,

he took his exercise under the eye of his doctor—a strange and miserable-looking object.

"There goes Sirdeller," Sograngе whispered. "Look at him—the man whose might is greater than any emperor's. There is no haven in the universe to which he does not hold the key. Look at him—master of the world!"

Peter shivered. There was something depressing in the sight of that mournful procession.

"He neither smokes nor drinks" Sograngе continued. "Women, as a sex, do not exist for him. His religion is a doubting Calvinism. He has a doctor and a clergyman always by his side to inject life and hope if they can. Look at him well, my friend. He represents a great moral lesson."

"Thanks!" Peter replied. "I am going to take the taste of him out of my mouth with a whisky and soda. Afterwards, I'm for the Duchesse."

But the Duchesse, apparently, was not for Peter. He found her in the music-room, with several of the little Marconi missives spread out before her, and she cut him dead. Peter, however, was a brave man and skilled at the game of bluff. So he stopped by her side and, without any preamble, addressed her.

"Duchesse," he said, "you are a woman of

perception. Which do you believe, then, in your heart, to be the more trustworthy—the Count von Hern or I ? "

She simply stared at him. He continued promptly :

" You have received your warning, I see."

" From whom ? "

" From the Count von Hern. Why believe what he says ? He may be a friend of yours—he may be a dear friend—but in your heart you know that he is both unscrupulous and selfish. Why accept his word and distrust me ? I, at least, am honest."

She raised her eyebrows.

" Honest ? " she repeated. " Whose word have I for that save your own ? And what concern is it of mine if you possess every one of the *bourgeois* qualities in the world ? You are presuming, sir."

" My friend Sograngé will tell you that I am to be trusted," Peter persisted.

" I see no reason why I should trouble myself about your personal characteristics," she replied coldly. " They do not interest me."

" On the contrary, Duchesse," Peter continued, fencing wildly, " you have never in your life been more in need of anyone's services than you are of mine."

The conflict was uneven. The Duchesse was a nervous, highly strung woman. The calm assurance of Peter's manner oppressed her with a sense of his mastery. She sank back upon the couch from which she had arisen.

"I wish you would tell me what you mean," she said. "You have no right to talk to me in this fashion. What have you to do with my affairs?"

"I have as much to do with them as the Count von Hern," Peter insisted boldly.

"I have known the Count von Hern," she answered, "for very many years. You have been a shipboard acquaintance of mine for a few hours."

"If you have known the Count von Hern for many years," Peter asserted, "you have found out by this time that he is an absolutely untrustworthy person."

"Supposing he is," she said, "will you tell me what concern it is of yours? Do you suppose for one moment that I am likely to discuss my private affairs with a perfect stranger?"

"You have no private affairs," Peter declared sternly. "They are the affairs of a nation."

She glanced at him with a little shiver. From that moment he felt that he was gaining ground. She looked around the room. It was

well filled, but in their corner they were almost unobserved.

"How much do you know?" she asked in a low tone which shook with passion.

Peter smiled enigmatically.

"Perhaps more even than you, Duchesse," he replied. "I should like to be your friend. You need one—you know that."

She rose abruptly to her feet.

"For to-night it is enough," she declared, wrapping her fur cloak around her. "You may talk to me to-morrow, Baron. I must think. If you desire really to be my friend there is, perhaps, one service which I may require of you. But to-night, no!"

Peter stood aside and allowed her to step past him. He was perfectly content with the progress he had made. Her farewell salute was by no means ungracious. As soon as she was out of sight he returned to the couch where she had been sitting. She had taken away the marconigrams, but she had left upon the floor several copies of the *New York Herald*. He took them up and read them carefully through. The last one he found particularly interesting, so much so that he folded it up, placed it in his coat pocket, and went off to look for Sogrange, whom he found at last in the saloon, watching a

noisy game of "Up, Jenkins!" Peter sank upon the cushioned seat by his side.

"You were right," he remarked. "Bernadine has been busy."

Sograngе smiled.

"I trust," he said, "that the Duchesse is not proving faithless?"

"So far," Peter replied, "I have kept my end up. To-morrow will be the test. Bernadine has filled her with caution. She thinks that I know everything—whatever everything may be. Unless I can discover a little more than I do now, to-morrow is going to be an exceedingly awkward day for me."

"There is every prospect of your acquiring a great deal of valuable information before then," Sograngе declared. "Sit tight, my friend. Something is going to happen."

On the threshold of the saloon, ushered in by one of the stewards, a tall, powerful-looking man, with a square, well-trimmed black beard, was standing looking around as though in search of someone. The steward pointed out, with an unmistakable movement of his head, Peter and Sograngе. The man approached and took the next table.

"Steward," he directed, "bring me a glass of vermouth and some dominoes."

Peter's eyes were suddenly bright. Sogrange touched his foot under the table and whispered a word of warning. The dominoes were brought. The new-comer arranged them as though for a game. Then he calmly withdrew the double-four and laid it before Sogrange.

"It has been my misfortune, Marquis," he said, "never to have made your acquaintance, although our mutual friends are many, and I think I may say that I have the right to claim a certain amount of consideration from you and your associates. You know me?"

"Certainly, Prince," Sogrange replied. "I am charmed. Permit me to present my friend, the Baron de Grost."

The new-comer bowed, and glanced a little nervously around.

"You will permit me," he begged. "I travel incognito. I have lived so long in England that I have permitted myself the name of an Englishman. I am travelling under the name of Mr. James Fanshawe."

"Mr. Fanshawe, by all means," Sogrange agreed. "In the meantime——"

"I claim my rights as a corresponding member of the Double Four," the new-comer declared. "My friend the Count von Hern finds menace to certain

plans of ours in your presence upon this steamer. Unknown to him, I come to you openly. I claim your aid, not your enmity."

"Let us understand one another clearly," Sograngе said. "You claim our aid in what?"

Mr. Fanshawe glanced around the saloon and lowered his voice.

"I claim your aid towards the overthrowing of the usurping House of Asturias, and the restoration to power in Spain of my own line."

Sograngе was silent for several moments. Peter was leaning forward in his place, deeply interested. Decidedly, this American trip seemed destined to lead toward events!

"Our active aid towards such an end," Sograngе said at last, "is impossible. The society of the Double Four does not interfere in the domestic policy of other nations for the sake of individual members."

"Then let me ask you why I find you upon this steamer?" Mr. Fanshawe demanded in a tone of suppressed excitement. "Is it for the sea voyage that you and your friend the Baron de Grost cross the Atlantic this particular week, on the same steamer as myself, as Mr. Sirdeller, and—and the Duchesse? One does not believe in such coinci-

dences! One is driven to conclude that it is your intention to interfere."

"The affair almost demands our interference," Sograngе replied smoothly. "With every due respect to you, Prince, there are great interests involved in this move of yours."

The Prince was a big man, but, for all his large features and bearded face, his expression was the expression of a peevish and passionate child. He controlled himself with an effort.

"Marquis," he said, "it is necessary—I say that it is necessary that we conclude an alliance."

Sograngе nodded approvingly.

"It is well spoken," he said; "but remember—the Baron de Grost represents England, and the English interests of our society."

The Prince of Marsine's face was not pleasant to look upon.

"Forgive me if you are an Englishman by birth, Baron," he said, turning towards him, "but a more interfering nation in other people's affairs than England has never existed in the pages of history. She must have a finger in every pie. Bah!"

Peter leaned over from his place.

"What about Germany, Mr. Fanshawe?" he asked with emphasis.

The Prince tugged at his beard. He was a little nonplussed.

"The Count von Hern," he confessed, "has been a good friend to me. The rulers of his country have always been hospitable and favourably inclined towards my family. The whole affair is of his design. I myself could scarcely have moved in it alone. One must reward one's helpers. There is no reason, however," he added, with a meaning glance at Peter," why other helpers should not be admitted."

"The reward which you offer to the Count von Hern," Peter remarked, "is of itself absolutely inimical to the interests of my country."

"Listen!" the Prince demanded, tapping the table before him. "It is true that within a year I am pledged to reward the Count von Hern in certain fashion. It is not possible that you know the terms of our compact, but from your words it is possible that you have guessed. Very well. Accept this from me. Remain neutral now, allow this matter to proceed to its natural conclusion, let your Government address representations to me when the time comes, adopting a bold front, and I promise that I will obey them. It will not be my fault that I am compelled to disappoint the Count von Hern. My seaboard

would be at the mercy of your fleet. Superior force must be obeyed."

"It is a matter, this," Sograngе said, "for discussion between my friend and me. I think you will find that we are neither of us unreasonable. In short, Prince, I see no insuperable reason why we should not come to terms."

"You encourage me," the Prince declared, in a gratified tone. "Do not believe, Marquis, that I am actuated in this matter wholly by motives of personal ambition. No, it is not so. A great desire has burned always in my heart, but it is not that alone which moves me. I assure you that of my certain knowledge Spain is honeycombed—is rotten with treason. A revolution is a certainty. How much better that that revolution should be conducted in a dignified manner; that I, with my reputation for democracy which I have carefully kept before the eyes of my people, should be elected President of the new Spanish Republic, even if it is the gold of the American who places me there. In a year or two's time, what may happen who can say? This craving for a republic is but a passing dream. Spain, at heart, is monarchical. She will be led back to the light. It is but a short step from the President's chair to the throne."

Sogrange and his companion sat quite still. They avoided looking at each other.

"There is one thing more," the Prince continued, dropping his voice as if, even at that distance, he feared the man of whom he spoke. "I shall not inform the Count von Hern of our conversation. It is not necessary, and, between ourselves, the Count is jealous. He sends me message after message that I remain in my state-room, that I seek no interview with Sirdeller, that I watch only. He is too much of the spy—the Count von Hern. He does not understand that code of honour, relying upon which I open my heart to you."

"You have done your cause no harm," Sogrange assured him, with subtle sarcasm. "We come now to the Duchesse."

The Prince leaned towards him. It was just at this moment that a steward entered with a marconigram, which he presented to the Prince. The latter tore it open, glanced it through, and gave vent to a little exclamation. The fingers which held the missive, trembled. His eyes blazed with excitement. He was absolutely unable to control his feelings.

"My two friends," he cried, in a tone broken with emotion, "it is you first who shall hear the

news! This message has just arrived. Sirdeller will have received its duplicate. The final report of the works in Havana Harbour will await us on our arrival in New York, but the substance of it is this. The *Maine* was sunk by a torpedo, discharged at close quarters underneath her magazine. Gentlemen, the House of Asturias is ruined!"

There was a breathless silence.

"Your information is genuine?" Sograngе asked softly.

"Without a doubt," the Prince replied. "I have been expecting this message. I shall cable to von Hern. We are still in communication. He may not have heard."

"We were about to speak of the Duchesse," Peter reminded him.

The Prince shook his head.

"Another time," he declared. "Another time."

He hurried away. It was already half-past ten and the saloon was almost empty. The steward came up to them.

"The saloon is being closed for the night, sir," he announced.

"Let us go on deck," Peter suggested.

They found their way up on to the windward side of the promenade, which was absolutely deserted. Far away in front of them now were

the disappearing lights of the *Lusitania.* The wind roared by as the great steamer rose and fell on the black stretch of waters. Peter stood very near to his companion.

"Listen, Sograngе," he said, "the affair is clear now save for one thing."

"You mean Sirdeller's motives?"

"Not at all," Peter answered. "An hour ago I came across the explanation of these. The one thing I will tell you afterwards. Now listen. Sirdeller came abroad last year for twelve months' travel. He took a great house in San Sebastian."

"Where did you hear this?" Sograngе asked.

"I read the story in the *New York Herald,*" Peter continued. "It is grossly exaggerated, of course, but this is the substance of it. Sirdeller and his suite were stopped upon the Spanish frontier and treated in an abominable fashion by the Customs officers. He was forced to pay a very large sum, unjustly, I should think. He paid under protest, appealed to the authorities, with no result. At San Sebastian he was robbed right and left, his privacy intruded upon. In short, he took a violent dislike and hatred to the country and everyone concerned in it. He moved with his entire suite to Nice, to the Golden Villa. There he expressed himself freely concerning Spain

and her Government. Count von Hern heard of it and presented Marsine. The plot was, without doubt, Bernadine's. Can't you imagine how he would put it? 'A revolution,' he would tell Sirdeller, 'is imminent in Spain. Here is the new President of the Republic. Money is no more to you than water. You are a patriotic American. Have you forgotten that the finest warship your country ever built, with six hundred of her devoted citizens, was sent to the bottom by the treachery of one of this effete race? The war was an inefficient revenge. The country still flourishes. It is for you to avenge America. With money Marsine can establish a republic in Spain within twenty-four hours!' Sirdeller hesitates. He would point out that it had never been proved that the destruction of the *Maine* was really due to Spanish treachery. It is the idea of a business man which followed. He, at his own expense, would raise the *Maine*. If it were true that the explosion occurred from outside, he would find the money. You see, the message has arrived. After all these years, the sea has given up its secret. Marsine will return to Spain with an unlimited credit behind him. The House of Asturias will crumble up like a pack of cards."

Sogrange looked out into the darkness. Perhaps

he saw in that great black gulf the pictures of these happenings, which his companion had prophesied. Perhaps, for a moment, he saw the panorama of a city in flames, the passing of a great country under the thrall of these new ideas. At any rate, he turned abruptly away from the side of the vessel and, taking Peter's arm, walked slowly down the deck.

"You have solved the puzzle, Baron," he said, gravely. "Now tell me one thing. Your story seems to dovetail everywhere."

"The one thing," Peter said, "is connected with the Duchesse. It was she, of her own will, who decided to come to America. I believe that but for her coming Bernadine and the Prince would have waited in their own country. Money can flash from America to England over the wires. It does not need to be fetched. They have still one fear. It is connected with the Duchesse. Let me think."

They walked up and down the deck. The lights were extinguished one by one, except in the smoke-room. A strange breed of sailors from the lower deck came up, with mops and buckets. The wind changed its quarter and the great ship began to roll. Peter stopped abruptly.

"I find this motion most unpleasant," he said.

"I am going to bed. To-night I cannot think. To-morrow, I promise you, we will solve this. Hush!"

He held out his hand and drew his companion back into the shadow of a lifeboat. A tall figure was approaching them along the deck. As he passed the little ray of light thrown out from the smoking-room, the man's features were clearly visible. It was the Prince. He was walking like one absorbed in thought. His eyes were set like a sleep-walker's. With one hand he gesticulated. The fingers of the other were twitching all the time. His head was lifted to the skies. There was something in his face which redeemed it from its disfiguring petulance.

"It is the man who dreams of power," Peter whispered. "It is one of the best moments, this. He forgets the vulgar means by which he intends to rise. He thinks only of himself, the dictator, king, perhaps emperor. He is of the breed of egoists."

Again and again the Prince passed, manifestly unconscious even of his whereabouts. Peter and Sograngе crept away unseen to their state-rooms.

In many respects the room resembled a miniature court of justice. The principal sitting-room

of the royal suite, which was the chief glory of the *Adriatic*, had been stripped of every superfluous article of furniture or embellishment. Curtains had been removed, all evidences of luxury disposed of. Temporarily the apartment had been transformed into a bare, cheerless place. Seated on a high chair, with his back to the wall, was Sirdeller. At his right hand was a small table, on which stood a glass of milk, a phial, a stethoscope. Behind, his doctor. At his left hand, a smooth-faced, silent young man—his secretary. Before him stood the Duchesse, Peter and Sogrange. Guarding the door was one of the watchmen, who, from his great physique, might well have been a policeman out of livery. Sirdeller himself, in the clear light which streamed through the large window, seemed more aged and shrunken than ever. His eyes were deep-set. No tinge of colour was visible in his cheeks. His chin protruded, his shaggy grey eyebrows gave him an unkempt appearance. He wore a black velvet cap, a strangely cut black morning coat and trousers, felt slippers, and his hands were clasped upon a stout ash walking-stick. He eyed the new-comers keenly but without expression.

"The lady may sit," he said.

He spoke almost in an undertone, as though

anxious to avoid the fatigue of words. The guardian of the door placed a chair, into which the Duchesse subsided. Sirdeller held his right hand towards his doctor, who felt his pulse. All the time Sirdeller watched him, his lips a little parted, a world of hungry excitement in his eyes. The doctor closed his watch with a snap and whispered something in Sirdeller's ear, apparently reassuring.

"I will hear this story," Sirdeller announced. "In two minutes every one must leave. If it takes longer it must remain unfinished."

Peter spoke up briskly.

"The story is this," he began. "You have promised to assist the Prince of Marsine to transform Spain into a republic, providing the salvage operations on the *Maine* prove that that ship was destroyed from outside. The salvage operations have been conducted at your expense, and finished. It has been proved that the *Maine* was destroyed by a mine or torpedo from the outside. Therefore, on the assumption that it was the treacherous deed of a Spaniard or Cuban imagining himself to be a patriot, you are prepared to carry out your undertaking and supply the Prince of Marsine with means to overthrow the kingdom of Spain."

Peter paused. The figure on the chair remained

motionless. No flicker of intelligence or interest disturbed the calm of his features. It was a silence almost unnatural.

"I have brought the Duchesse here," Peter continued, "to tell you the truth as to the *Maine* disaster."

Not even then was there the slightest alteration in those ashen grey features.

The Duchesse looked up. She had the air of one only too eager to speak and finish.

"In those days," she said, "I was the wife of a rich Cuban gentleman whose name I withhold. The American officers on board the *Maine* used to visit at our house. My husband was jealous; perhaps he had cause."

The Duchesse paused. Even though the light of tragedy and romance side by side seemed suddenly to creep into the room, Sirdeller listened as one come back from a dead world.

"One night," the Duchesse went on, "my husband's suspicions were changed into knowledge. He came home unexpectedly. The American—the officer—I loved him—was there on the balcony with me. My husband said nothing. The officer returned to his ship. That night my husband came into my room. He bent over my bed. 'It is not you,' he whispered, 'whom I shall destroy,

for the pain of death is short. Anguish of mind may live. To-night, six hundred ghosts may hang about your pillow!'"

Her voice broke. There was something grim and unnatural in that curious stillness. Even the secretary was at last breathing a little faster. The watchman at the door was leaning forward. Sirdeller simply moved his hand to the doctor, who held up his finger while he felt the pulse. The beat of his watch seemed to sound through the unnatural silence. In a minute he spoke.

"The lady may proceed," he announced.

"My husband," the Duchesse continued, "was an officer in charge of the Mines and Ordnance Department. He went out that night in a small boat, after a visit to the strong house. No soul has ever seen or heard of him since, or his boat. It is only I who know."

Her voice died away. Sirdeller stretched out his hand and very deliberately drank a tablespoonful or two of his milk.

"I believe the lady's story," he declared. "The Marsine affair is finished. Let no one be admitted to have speech with me again upon this subject."

He had half turned towards his secretary. The young man bowed. The doctor pointed towards

the door. The Duchesse, Peter, and Sogrange filed slowly out. In the bright sunlight the Duchesse burst into a peal of hysterical laughter. Even Peter felt, for a moment, unnerved. Suddenly he, too, laughed.

"I think," he said, "that you and I had better get out of the way, Sogrange, when the Count von Hern meets us at New York!"

CHAPTER VIII

AN ALIEN SOCIETY

Sograngе and Peter, Baron de Grost, standing upon the threshold of their hotel, gazed out upon New York and liked the look of it. They had landed from the steamer a few hours before, had already enjoyed the luxury of a bath, a visit to an American barber's, and a genuine cocktail.

"I see no reason," Sograngе declared, "why we should not take a week's holiday."

Peter, glancing up into the blue sky and down into the faces of the well-dressed and beautiful women who were streaming up Fifth Avenue, was wholly of the same mind.

"If we return by this afternoon's steamer," he remarked, "we shall have Bernadine for a fellow-passenger. Bernadine is annoyed with us just now. I must confess that I should feel more at my ease with a few thousand miles of the Atlantic between us."

"Let it be so," Sograngе assented. "We will

explore this marvellous city. Never," he added, taking his companion's arm, "did I expect to see such women save in my own, the mistress of all cities. So *chic*, my dear Baron, and such a carriage! We will lunch at one of the fashionable restaurants and drive in the Park afterwards. First of all, however, we must take a stroll along this wonderful Fifth Avenue."

The two men spent a morning after their own hearts. They lunched astonishingly well at Sherry's and drove afterwards in the Central Park. When they returned to the hotel Sograngе was in excellent spirits.

"I feel, my friend," he announced, "that we are going to have a very pleasant and, in some respects, a unique week. To meet friends and acquaintances everywhere, as one must do in every capital in Europe, is, of course, pleasant, but there is a monotony about it from which one is glad sometimes to escape. We lunch here and we promenade in the places frequented by those of a similar station to our own, and behold! we know no one. We are lookers on. Perhaps, for a long time, it might gall. For a brief period there is a restfulness about it which pleases me."

"I should have liked," Peter murmured, "an introduction to the lady in the blue hat."

"You are a gregarious animal," Sograngе declared. "You do not understand the pleasure of a little comparative isolation with an intellectual companion such as myself. What the devil is the meaning of this?"

They had reached their sitting-room, and upon a small round table stood a great collection of cards and notes. Sograngе took them up helplessly, one after the other, reading the names aloud and letting them fall through his fingers. Some were known to him, some were not. He began to open the notes. In effect they were all the same—On what day would the Marquis de Sograngе and his distinguished friend care to dine, lunch, yacht, golf, shoot, go to the opera, join a theatre party? Of what clubs would they care to become members? What kind of hospitality would be most acceptable?

Sograngе sank into a chair.

"My friend," he exclaimed, "they all have to be answered—that collection there! The visits have to be returned. It is magnificent, this hospitality, but what can one do?"

Peter looked at the pile of correspondence upon which Sograngе's inroad, indeed, seemed to have had but little effect.

"One could engage a secretary, of course,"

he suggested, doubtfully. "But the visits! Our week's holiday is gone."

"Not at all," Sogrange replied. "I have an idea."

The telephone bell rang. Peter took up the receiver and listened for a moment. He turned to Sogrange, still holding it in his hand.

"You will be pleased, also, to hear," he announced, "that there are half a dozen reporters downstairs waiting to interview us."

Sogrange received the information with interest.

"Have them sent up at once," he directed, "every one of them."

"What, all at the same time?" Peter asked.

"All at the same time it must be," Sogrange answered. "Give them to understand that it is an affair of five minutes only."

They came trooping in. Sogrange welcomed them cordially.

"My friend the Baron de Grost," he explained, indicating Peter. "I am the Marquis de Sogrange. Let us know what we can do to serve you."

One of the men stepped forward.

"Very glad to meet you, Marquis, and you, Baron," he said. "I won't bother you with any introductions, but I and the company here represent the Press of New York. We should like some

information for our papers as to the object of your visit here and the probable length of your stay."

Sograngе extended his hands.

"My dear friend," he exclaimed, "the object of our visit was, I thought, already well known. We are on our way to Mexico. We leave to-night. My friend, the Baron is, as you know, a financier. I, too, have a little money to invest. We are going to meet some business acquaintances with a view to inspecting some mining properties. That is absolutely all I can tell you. You can understand, of course, that fuller information would be impossible."

"Why, that's quite natural, Marquis," the spokesman of the reporters replied. "We don't like the idea of your hustling out of New York like this, though."

Sograngе looked at the clock.

"It is unavoidable," he declared. "We are relying upon you, gentlemen, to publish the fact, because you will see," he added, pointing to the table, "that we have been the recipients of a great many civilities which it is impossible for us to acknowledge properly. If it will give you any pleasure to see us upon our return, you will be very welcome. In the meantime, you will understand our haste."

There were a few more civilities and the representatives of the Press took their departure. Peter looked at his companion doubtfully as Sograngе returned from showing them out.

"I suppose this means that we have to catch to-day's steamer after all?" he remarked.

"Not necessarily," Sograngе answered. "I have a plan. We will leave for the Southern Depot, wherever it may be. Afterwards, you shall use that wonderful skill of yours, of which I have heard so much, to effect some slight change in our appearance. We will then go to another hotel, in another quarter of New York, and take our week's holiday incognito. What do you think of that for an idea?"

"Not much," Peter replied. "It isn't so easy to dodge the newspapers and the Press in this country. Besides, although I could manage myself very well, you would be an exceedingly awkward subject. Your tall and elegant figure, your aquiline nose, the shapeliness of your hands and feet, give you a distinction which I should find it hard to conceal."

Sograngе smiled.

"You are a remarkably observant fellow, Baron. I quite appreciate your difficulty. Still,

with a club foot, eh ?—and spectacles instead of my eyeglasses——"

"Oh, no doubt something could be managed," Peter interrupted. "You're really in earnest about this, are you ?"

"Absolutely," Sograngе declared. "Come here."

He drew Peter to the window. They were on the twelfth story, and to a European there was something magnificent in that tangled mass of buildings threaded by the elevated railway, with its screaming trains, the clearness of the atmosphere, and in the white streets below, like polished belts through which the swarms of people streamed like insects.

"Imagine it all lit up !" Sograngе exclaimed. "The sky-signs all ablaze, the flashing of fire from those cable wires, the lights glittering from those tall buildings ! This is a wonderful place, Baron. We must see it. Ring for the bill. Order one of those magnificent omnibuses. Press the button, too, for the personage whom they call the valet. Perhaps, with a little gentle persuasion, he could be induced to pack our clothes."

With his finger upon the bell, Peter hesitated. He, too, loved adventures, but the gloom of a presentiment had momentarily depressed him.

"We are marked men, remember, Sograngе," he said. "An escapade of this sort means a certain amount of risk, even in New York."

Sograngе laughed.

"Bernadine caught the midday steamer. We have no enemies here that I know of."

Peter pressed the button. An hour or so later the Marquis de Sograngе and Peter, Baron de Grost, took their leave of New York.

They chose an hotel some distance down Broadway, within a stone's throw of Rector's Restaurant. Peter, with whitened hair, gold-rimmed spectacles, a slouch hat and a fur coat, passed easily enough for an English maker of electrical instruments; while Sograngе, shabbier, and in ready-made American clothes, was transformed into a Canadian having some connection with theatrical business. They plunged into the heart of New York life, and found the whole thing like a tonic. The intense vitality of the people, the pandemonium of Broadway at midnight, with its flaming illuminations, its eager crowd, its inimitable restlessness, fascinated them both. Sograngе, indeed, remembering the decadent languor of the crowds of pleasure-seekers thronging his own boulevards, was never weary of watching these men and women. They passed from the streets to the restaurants,

from the restaurants to the theatre, out into the streets again, back to the restaurants, and once more into the streets. Sograngе was like a glutton. The mention of bed was hateful to him. For three days they existed without a moment's boredom.

On the fourth evening Peter found Sograngе deep in conversation with the head porter. In a few minutes he led Peter away to one of the bars where they usually took their cocktail.

"My friend," he announced, "to-night I have a treat for you. So far we have looked on at the external night life of New York. Wonderful and thrilling it has been, too. But there is the underneath also. Why not? There is a vast polyglot population here, full of energy and life. A criminal class exists as a matter of course. To-night we make our bow to it."

"And by what means?" Peter inquired.

"Our friend the hall porter," Sograngе continued, "has given me the card of an ex-detective who will be our escort. He calls for us to-night, or rather, to-morrow morning, at one o'clock. Then, behold! the wand is waved, the land of adventures opens before us."

Peter grunted.

"I don't want to damp your enthusiasm, my

Canadian friend," he said, "but the sort of adventures you may meet with to-night are scarcely likely to fire your romantic nature. I know a little about what they call this underneath world in New York. It will probably resolve itself into a visit to Chinatown, where we shall find the usual dummies taking opium, and quite prepared to talk about it for the usual tip. After that we shall visit a few low dancing halls, be shown the scene of several murders, and the thing is done."

"You are a cynic," Sograngе declared. "You would throw cold water upon any enterprise. Anyway, our detective is coming. We must make use of him, for I have engaged to pay him five dollars."

"We'll go where you like," Peter assented, "so long as we dine on a roof garden. This beastly fur coat keeps me in a chronic state of perspiration."

"Never mind," Sograngе said consolingly, "it's most effective. A roof garden, by all means."

"And recollect," Peter insisted, "I bar Chinatown. We've both of us seen the real thing, and there's nothing real about what they show you here."

"Chinatown is erased from our programme," Sograngе agreed. "We go now to dine. Remind me, Baron, that I inquire for these strange dishes

of which one hears—terrapin, canvas-backed duck, green corn, and strawberry shortcake."

Peter smiled grimly.

"How like a Frenchman," he exclaimed, "to take no account of seasons! Never mind, Marquis, you shall give your order and I will sketch the waiter's face. By the by, if you're in earnest about this expedition to-night, put your revolver into your pocket."

"But we're going with an ex-detective," Sograngе replied.

"One never knows," Peter said carelessly.

They dined close to the stone palisading of one of New York's most famous roof gardens. Sograngе ordered an immense dinner, but spent most of his time gazing downwards. They were higher up than at the hotel, and they could see across the tangled maze of lights even to the river, across which the great ferry boats were speeding all the while—huge creatures of streaming fire and whistling sirens. The air where they sat was pure and crisp. There was no fog, no smoke, to cloud the almost crystalline clearness of the night.

"Baron," Sograngе declared, "if I had lived in this city I should have been a different man. No wonder the people are all-conquering."

"Too much electricity in the air for me,"

Peter answered. "I like a little repose. I can't think where these people find it."

"One hopes," Sograngе murmured, "that before they progress any further in utilitarianism they will find some artist, one of themselves, to express all this."

"In the meantime," Peter interrupted, "the waiter would like to know what we are going to drink. I've eaten such a confounded jumble of things of your ordering that I should like some champagne."

"Who shall say that I am not generous!" Sograngе replied, taking up the wine carte. "Champagne it shall be. We need something to nerve us for our adventures."

Peter leaned across the table.

"Sograngе," he whispered, "for the last twenty-four hours I have had some doubts as to the success of our little enterprise. It has occurred to me more than once that we are being shadowed."

Sograngе frowned.

"I sometimes wonder," he remarked, "how a man of your suspicious nature ever acquired the reputation you undoubtedly enjoy."

"Perhaps it is because of my suspicious nature," Peter said. "There is a man staying in our hotel whom we are beginning to see quite a great deal

of. He was talking to the head porter a few minutes before you this afternoon. He supped at the same restaurant last night. He is dining now, three places behind you to the right, with a young lady who has been making flagrant attempts to flirtation with me, notwithstanding my grey hairs."

"Your reputation, my dear Peter," Sograngе murmured.

"As a decoy," Peter interrupted, "the young lady's methods are too vigorous. She pretends to be terribly afraid of her companion, but it is entirely obvious that she is acting on his instructions. Of course, this may be a ruse of the reporters. On the other hand, I think it would be wise to abandon our little expedition to-night."

Sograngе shook his head.

"So far as I am concerned," he said, "I am committed to it."

"In which case," Peter replied, "I am certainly committed to being your companion. The only question is whether one shall fall to the decoy and suffer oneself to be led in the direction her companion desires, or whether we shall go blundering into trouble on our own account with your friend the ex-detective."

Sograngе glanced over his shoulder, leaned back

in his chair, for a moment, as though to look at the stars, and finally lit a cigarette.

"There is a lack of subtlety about that young person, Baron," he declared, "which stifles one's suspicions. I suspect her to be merely one more victim to your undoubted charms. In the interests of madame your wife I shall take you away. The decoy shall weave her spells in vain."

They paid their bill and departed a few minutes later. The man and the girl were also in the act of leaving. The former seemed to be having some dispute about the bill. The girl, standing with her back to him, scribbled a line upon a piece of paper, and, as Peter went by, pushed it into his hand with a little warning gesture. In the lift he opened it. The few pencilled words contained nothing but an address: Number 15, 100th Street, East.

"Lucky man!" Sograngе sighed.

Peter made no remark, but he was thoughtful for the next hour or so.

The ex-detective proved to be an individual of fairly obvious appearance, whose complexion and thirst indicated a very possible reason for his life of leisure. He heard with surprise that his patrons were not inclined to visit Chinatown, but he showed a laudable desire to fall in with their schemes, provided always that they included a reasonable num-

ber of visits to places where refreshments could be obtained. From first to last the expedition was a disappointment. They visited various smoke-hung dancing halls, decorated for the most part with oleographs and cracked mirrors, in which sickly-looking young men of unwholesome aspect were dancing with their feminine counterparts. The attitude of their guide was alone amusing.

"Say, you want to be careful in here!" he would declare, in an awed tone, on entering one of these tawdry palaces. "Guess this is one of the toughest spots in New York City. You stick close to me and I'll make things all right."

His method of making things all right was the same in every case. He would form a circle of disreputable youths, for whose drinks Sogrange was called upon to pay. The attitude of the young men was more dejected than positively vicious. They showed not the slightest signs of any desire to make themselves unpleasant. Only once, when Sogrange incautiously displayed a gold watch, did the eyes of one or two of their number glisten. The ex-detective changed his place and whispered hoarsely in his patron's ear:

"Say, don't you flash anything of that sort about here! That young cove right opposite to you is one of the best-known sneak-thieves

in the city. You're asking for trouble that way."

"If he or any other of them want my watch," Sograngе answered, calmly, "let them come and fetch it. However," he added, buttoning up his coat, "no doubt you are right. Is there anywhere else to take us?"

The man hesitated.

"There ain't much that you haven't seen," he remarked.

Sograngе laughed softly as he rose to his feet.

"A sell, my dear friend," he said to Peter. "This terrible city keeps its real criminal class somewhere else rather than in the show places."

A man who had been standing in the doorway, looking in for several moments, strolled up to them. Peter recognised him at once and touched Sograngе on the arm. The new-comer accosted them pleasantly.

"Say, you'll excuse my butting in," he began, "but I can see you are kind of disappointed. These suckers"—indicating the ex-detective—"talk a lot about what they're going to show you, and when they get you round, it all amounts to nothing. This is the sort of thing they bring you to as representing the wickedness of New York! That's so, Rastall, isn't it?"

The ex-detective looked a little sheepish.

"Yes, there ain't much more to be seen," he admitted. "Perhaps you'll take the job on if you think there is."

"Well, I'd engage to show the gentlemen something a sight more interesting than this," the new-comer continued. "They don't want to sit down and drink with the scum of the earth."

"Perhaps," Sograngе suggested, "this gentleman has something in his mind which he thinks would appeal to us. We have a motor-car outside, and we are out for adventures."

"What sort of adventures?" the new-comer asked bluntly.

Sograngе shrugged his shoulders lightly.

"We are lookers-on merely," he explained. "My friend and I have travelled a good deal. We have seen something of criminal life in Paris and London, Vienna, and Budapest. I shall not break any confidence if I tell you that my friend is a writer, and material such as this is useful."

The new-comer smiled.

"Say," he exclaimed, "in a way, it's fortunate for you that I happened along! You come right with me and I'll show you something that very few other people in this city know of. Guess you'd better pay this fellow off," he added,

indicating the ex-detective. "He's no more use to you."

Sograngе and Peter exchanged questioning glances.

"It is very kind of you, sir," Peter decided, "but for my part I have had enough for one evening."

"Just as you like, of course," the other remarked, with studied unconcern.

"What kind of place would it be?" Sograngе asked.

The new-comer drew them on one side,although, as a matter of fact, everyone else had melted away.

"Have you ever heard of the secret societies of New York?" he inquired. "Well, I guess you haven't, anyway—not to know anything about them. Well, then, listen. There's a society meets within a few steps of here, which has more to do with regulating the criminal classes of the city than any police establishment. There'll be a man there within an hour or so who, to my knowledge, has committed seven murders. The police can't get him. They never will. He's under our protection."

"May we visit such a place as you describe without danger?" Peter asked calmly.

"No!" the man answered. "There's danger in going anywhere, it seems to me, if it's worth

while. So long as you keep a still tongue in your head and don't look about you too much, there's nothing will happen to you. If you get gassing a lot, you might tumble in for almost anything. Don't come unless you like. It's a chance for you, as you're a writer, but you'd best keep out of it if you're in any way nervous."

"You said it was quite close?" Sogrange inquired.

"Within a yard or two," the man replied. "It's right this way."

They left the hall with their new escort. When they looked for their motor-car, they found it had gone.

"It don't do to keep them things waiting about round here," their new friend remarked, carelessly. "I guess I'll send you back to your hotel all right. Step this way."

"By the by, what street is this we are in?" Peter asked.

"100th Street," the man answered.

Peter shook his head.

"I'm a little superstitious about that number," he declared. "Is that an elevated railway there? I think we've had enough, Sogrange."

Sogrange hesitated. They were standing now in front of a tall, gloomy house, unkempt, with broken

gate—a large but miserable-looking abode. The passers-by in the street were few. The whole character of the surroundings was squalid. The man pushed open the broken gate.

"You cross the road right there to the elevated," he directed. "If you ain't coming, I'll bid you good-night."

Once more they hesitated. Peter, perhaps, saw more than his companion. He saw the dark shapes lurking under the railway arch. He knew instinctively that they were in some sort of danger. And yet the love of adventure was on fire in his blood. His belief in himself was immense. He whispered to Sogrange.

"I do not trust our guide," he said. "If you care to risk it, I am with you."

"Mind the broken pavement," the man called out. "This ain't exactly an abode of luxury."

They climbed some broken steps. Their guide opened a door with a Yale key. The door swung to after them and they found themselves in darkness. There had been no light in the windows. There was no light, apparently, in the house. Their companion produced an electric torch from his pocket.

"You had best follow me," he advised. "Our

quarters face out the other way. We keep this end looking a little deserted."

They passed through a swing door and everything was at once changed. A multitude of lamps hung from the ceiling, the floor was carpeted, the walls clean.

"We don't go in for electric light," their guide explained, "as we try not to give the place away. We manage to keep it fairly comfortable, though."

He pushed open the door and entered a somewhat gorgeously furnished salon. There were signs here of feminine occupation, an open piano, and the smell of cigarettes. Once more Peter hesitated.

"Your friends seem to be in hiding," he remarked. "Personally, I am losing my curiosity."

"Guess you won't have to wait very long," the man replied, with meaning.

The room was suddenly invaded on all sides. Four doors, which were quite hidden by the pattern of the wall, had opened almost simultaneously, and at least a dozen men had entered. This time both Sograngе and Peter knew that they were face to face with the real thing. These were men who came silently in, not cigarette-stunted youths. Two of them were in evening dress; three or four had the appearance of prize-fighters. In their coun-

tenances was one expression common to all—an air of quiet and conscious strength.

A fair-headed man, in a dinner jacket and black tie, became at once their spokesman. He was possessed of a very slight American accent, and he beamed at them through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am very glad to meet you both."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," Sograngе answered. "Our friend here," he added, indicating their guide, "found us trying to gain a little insight into the more interesting part of New York life. He was kind enough to express a wish to introduce us to you."

The man smiled. He looked very much like some studious clerk, except that his voice seemed to ring with some latent power.

"I am afraid," he said, "that your friend's interest in you was not entirely unselfish. For three days he has carried in his pocket an order instructing him to produce you here."

"I knew it!" Peter whispered, under his breath.

"You interest me," Sograngе replied. "May I know whom I have the honour of addressing?"

"You can call me Burr," the man announced;

"Philip Burr. Your names it is not our wish to know."

"I am afraid I do not quite understand," Sograngе said.

"It was scarcely to be expected that you should," Mr. Philip Burr admitted. "All I can tell you is that, in cases like yours, I really prefer not to know with whom I have to deal."

"You speak as though you had business with us," Peter remarked.

"Without doubt, I have," the other replied, grimly. "It is my business to see that you do not leave these premises alive."

Sograngе drew up a chair against which he had been leaning, and sat down.

"Really," he said, "that would be most inconvenient."

Peter, too, shook his head, sitting upon the end of a sofa and folding his arms. Something told him that the moment for fighting was not yet.

"Inconvenient or not," Mr. Philip Burr continued, "I have orders to carry out which I can assure you have never yet been disobeyed since the formation of our society. From what I can see of you, you appear to be very amiable gentlemen, and if it would interest you to choose the

method—say, of your release—why, I can assure you we'll do all we can to meet your views."

"I am beginning," Sograngе remarked, "to feel quite at home."

"You see, we've been through this sort of thing before," Peter added, blandly.

Mr. Philip Burr took a cigar from his case and lit it. At a motion of his hand one of the company passed the box to his two guests.

"You're not counting upon a visit from the police, or anything of that sort, I hope?" Mr. Philip Burr asked.

Sograngе shook his head.

"Certainly not," he replied. "I may say that much of the earlier portion of my life was spent in frustrating the well-meant but impossible schemes of that body of men."

"If only we had a little more time," Mr. Burr declared, "it seems to me I should like to make the acquaintance of you two gentlemen."

"The matter is entirely in your own hands," Peter reminded him. "We are in no hurry."

Mr. Burr smiled genially.

"You make me think better of humanity," he confessed. "A month ago we had a man here—got him along somehow or other—and I had to tell him that he was up against it like you two are.

My ! the fuss he made ! Kind of saddened me to think a man should be such a coward."

" Some people are like that," Sograngе remarked. " By the by, Mr. Burr, you'll pardon my curiosity. Whom have we to thank for our introduction here to-night ? "

" I don't know as there's any particular harm in telling you," Mr. Burr replied.

" Nor any particular good," a man who was standing by his side interrupted. " Say, Phil, you drag these things out too much. Are there any questions you've got to ask 'em, or any property to collect ? "

" Nothing of the sort," Mr. Burr admitted.

" Then let the gang get to work," the other declared.

The two men were suddenly conscious that they were being surrounded. Peter's hand stole on to the butt of his revolver. Sograngе rose slowly to his feet. His hands were thrust out in front of him with the thumbs turned down. The four fingers of each hand flashed for a minute through the air. Mr. Philip Burr lost all his self-control.

" Say, where the devil did you learn that trick ? " he cried.

Sograngе laughed scornfully.

"Trick!" he exclaimed. "Philip Burr, you are unworthy of your position. I am the Marquis de Sogrange, and my friend here is the Baron de Grost."

Mr. Philip Burr had no words. His cigar had dropped on to the carpet. He was simply staring.

"If you need proof," Sogrange continued, "further than any I have given you, I have in my pocket, at the present moment, a letter, signed by you yourself, pleading for formal reinstatement. This is how you would qualify for it! You make use of your power to run a common decoy house, to do away with men for money. What fool gave you our names, pray?"

Mr. Philip Burr was only the wreck of a man. He could not even control his voice.

"It was some German or Belgian nobleman," he faltered. "He brought us excellent letters, and he made a large contribution. It was the Count von Hern."

The anger of Sogrange seemed suddenly to fade away. He threw himself into a chair by the side of his companion.

"My dear Baron," he exclaimed, "Bernadine has scored, indeed! Your friend has a sense of humour which overwhelms me. Imagine it. He has delivered the two heads of our great society

into the hands of one of its cast-off branches! Bernadine is a genius, indeed!"

Mr. Philip Burr began slowly to recover himself. He waved his hand. Nine out of the twelve men left the room.

"Marquis," he said, "for ten years there has been no one whom I have desired to meet so much as you. I came to Europe, but you declined to receive me. I know very well we can't keep our end up like you over there, because we haven't politics and those sort of things to play with, but we've done our best. We've encouraged only criminology of the highest order. We've tried all we can to keep the profession select. The gaol-bird pure and simple we have cast out. The men who have suffered at our hands have been men who have met with their deserts."

"What about us?" Peter demanded. "It seems to me that you had most unpleasant plans for our future."

Philip Burr held up his hands.

"As I live," he declared, "this is the first time that any money consideration has induced me to break away from our principles. Count von Hern had powerful friends who were our friends, and he gave me the word, straight, that you two had an appointment down below which was considerably

overdue. I don't know, even now, why I consented. I guess it isn't much use apologising."

Sograngе rose to his feet.

"Well," he said, "I am not inclined to bear malice, but you must understand this from me, Philip Burr. As a society I dissolve you. I deprive you of your title and of your signs. Call yourself what you will, but never again mention the name of the 'Double Four.' With us in Europe another era has dawned. We are on the side of law and order. We protect only criminals of a certain class, in whose operations we have faith. There is no future for such a society in this country. Therefore, as I say, I dissolve it. Now, if you are ready, perhaps you will be so good as to provide us with the means of reaching our hotel."

Philip Burr led them into a back street, where his own handsome automobile was placed at their service.

"This kind of breaks me all up," he declared, as he gave the instructions to the chauffeur. "If there were two men on the face of this earth whom I'd have been proud to meet in a friendly sort of way, it's you two."

"We bear no malice, Mr. Burr," Sograngе assured him. "You can, if you will do us the

honour, lunch with us to-morrow at one o'clock at Rector's. My friend here is very interested in the Count von Hern, and he would probably like to hear exactly how this affair was arranged."

"I'll be there, sure," Philip Burr promised with a farewell wave of the hand.

Sograngе and Peter drove towards their hotel in silence. It was only when they emerged into the civilised part of the city that Sograngе began to laugh softly.

"My friend," he murmured, "you bluffed fairly well, but you were afraid. Oh, how I smiled to see your fingers close round the butt of that revolver!"

"What about you?" Peter asked gruffly. "You don't suppose you took me in, do you?"

Sograngе smiled.

"I had two reasons for coming to New York," he said. "One we accomplished upon the steamer. The other was——"

"Well?"

"To reply personally to this letter of Mr. Philip Burr," Sograngе replied, "which letter, by the by, was dated from 15, 100th Street, New York. An ordinary visit there would have been useless to me. Something of this sort was necessary."

"Then you knew!" Peter gasped. "Notwithstanding all your bravado, you knew."

"I had a very fair idea," Sograngе admitted. "Don't be annoyed with me, my friend. You have had a little experience. It is all useful. It isn't the first time you've looked death in the face. Adventures come to some men unasked. You, I think, were born with the habit of them."

Peter smiled. They had reached the hotel courtyard, and he raised himself stiffly.

"There's a fable about the pitcher that went once too often to the well," he remarked. "I have had my share of luck—more than my share. The end must come some time, you know."

"Is this superstition?" Sograngе asked.

"Superstition pure and simple," Peter confessed, taking his key from the office. "It doesn't alter anything. I am fatalist enough to shrug my shoulders and move on. But I tell you, Sograngе," he added, after a moment's pause, "I wouldn't admit it to anyone else in the world, but I am afraid of Bernadine. I have had the best of it so often. It can't last. In all we've had twelve encounters. The next will be the thirteenth."

Sograngе shrugged his shoulders slightly as he rang for the lift.

"I'd propose you for the Thirteen Club, only

there's some uncomfortable clause about yearly suicides which might not suit you," he remarked. "Good night, and don't dream of Bernadine and your thirteenth encounter."

"I only hope," Peter murmured, "that I may be in a position to dream after it!"

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Baron de Grost glanced at the card which his butler had brought in to him, carelessly at first, afterwards with that curious rigidity of attention which usually denotes the setting free of a flood of memories.

"The gentleman would like to see you, sir," the man announced.

"You can show him in at once," Peter replied.

The servant withdrew. Peter, during those few minutes of waiting, stood with his back to the room and his face to the window, looking out across the square, in reality seeing nothing, completely immersed in this strange flood of memories. John Dory—Sir John Dory now—a quondam enemy, whom he had met but seldom during these later years. The figure of this man who had once loomed so largely in his life, had gradually shrunk away into the background. Their avoidance of each other arose, perhaps, from a sort of instinct

which was certainly no matter of ill-will. Still, the fact remained that they had scarcely exchanged a word for years, and Peter turned to receive his unexpected guest with a curiosity which he did not trouble wholly to conceal.

Sir John Dory—Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard, a person of weight and importance—had changed a great deal during the last few years. His hair had become grey, his walk more dignified. There was the briskness, however, of his best days in his carriage, and in the flash of his brown eyes. He held out his hand to his ancient foe with a smile.

"My dear Baron," he said, "I hope you are going to say that you are glad to see me."

"Unless," Peter replied, with a good-humoured grimace, "your visit is official, I am more than glad—I am charmed. Sit down. I was just going to take my morning cigar. You will join me? Good! Now I am ready for the worst that can happen."

The two men seated themselves. John Dory pulled at his cigar appreciatively, sniffed its flavour for a moment, and then leaned forward in his chair.

"My visit, Baron," he announced, "is semi-official. I am here to ask you a favour."

"An official favour?" Peter demanded quickly.

His visitor hesitated, as though he found the question hard to answer.

"To tell you the truth," he declared, "this call of mine is wholly an inspiration. It does not in any way concern you personally, or your position in this country. What that may be I do not know, except that I am sure it is above any suspicion."

"Quite so," Peter murmured. "How diplomatic you have become, my dear friend!"

John Dory smiled.

"Perhaps I am fencing about too much," he said. "I know, of course, that you are a member of a very powerful and wealthy French society, whose object and aims, so far as I know, are entirely harmless."

"I am delighted to be assured that you recognise that fact," Peter admitted.

"I might add," John Dory continued, "that this harmlessness is of recent date."

"Really, you do seem to know a good deal," Peter confessed.

"I find myself still fencing," Dory declared. "A matter of habit, I suppose. I didn't mean to when I came. I made up my mind to tell you simply that Guillot was in London, and to ask you if you could help me to get rid of him."

Peter looked thoughtfully into his companion's

face, but he did not speak. He understood at such moments the value of silence.

"We speak together," Dory continued softly, "as men who understand one another. Guillot is the one criminal in Europe whom we all fear; not I alone, mind you—it is the same in Berlin, in Petersburg, in Vienna. He has never been caught. It is my honest belief that he never will be caught. At the same time, wherever he arrives the thunder-clouds gather. He leaves behind him always a trail of evil deeds."

"Very well put," Peter murmured. "Quite picturesque."

"Can you help me to get rid of him?" Dory inquired. "I have my hands full just now, as you can imagine, what with the political crisis and these constant mass meetings. I want Guillot out of the country. If you can manage this for me I shall be your eternal debtor."

"Why do you imagine," Peter asked, "that I can help you in this matter?"

There was a brief silence. John Dory knocked the ash from his cigar.

"Times have changed," he said. "The harmlessness of your great society, my dear Baron, is at present admitted. But there were days——"

"Exactly," Peter interrupted. "As shrewd as

ever, I perceive. Do you know anything of the object of his coming ? "

" Nothing."

" Anything of his plans ? "

" Nothing."

" You know where he is staying ? "

" Naturally," Dory answered. " He has taken a second-floor flat in Crayshaw Mansions, Shaftesbury Avenue. As usual, he is above all petty artifices. He has taken it under the name of Monsieur Guillot."

" I really don't know whether there is anything I can do," Peter decided, " but I will look into the matter for you with pleasure. Perhaps I may be able to bring a little influence to bear—indirectly, of course. If so, it is at your service. Lady Dory is well, I trust ? "

" In the best of health," Sir John replied, accepting the hint and rising to his feet. " I shall hear from you soon ? "

" Without a doubt," Peter answered. " I must certainly call upon Monsieur Guillot."

Peter wasted no time in paying his promised visit. That same afternoon he rang the bell at the flat in Crayshaw Mansions. A typical French butler showed him into the room where the great man sat. Monsieur Guillot, slight, elegant, pre-

eminently a dandy, was lounging upon a sofa, being manicured by a young lady. He threw down his *Petit Journal* and rose to his feet, however, at his visitor's entrance.

"My dear Baron," he exclaimed, "but this is charming of you! Mademoiselle," he added, turning to the manicurist, "you will do me the favour of retiring for a short time. Permit me."

He opened the door and showed her out. Then he came back to Peter.

"A visit of courtesy, Monsieur le Baron?" he asked.

"Without a doubt," Peter replied.

"It is beyond all measure charming of you," Guillot declared, "but let me ask you a question. Is it peace or war?"

"It is what you choose to make it," Peter answered.

The man threw out his hands. There was the shadow of a frown upon his pale forehead. It was a matter for protest, this.

"Why do you come?" he demanded. "What have we in common? The society has expelled me. Very well, I go my own way. Why not? I am free of your control to-day. You have no more right to interfere with my schemes than I with yours."

"We have the ancient right of power," Peter said grimly. "You were once a prominent member of our organisation, the spoilt protégé of madame, a splendid maker, if you will, of criminal history. Those days have passed. We offered you a pension which you have refused. It is now our turn to speak. We require you to leave this city in twenty-four hours."

The man's face was livid with anger. He was of the fair type of Frenchman, with deep-set eyes, and a straight, cruel mouth only partly concealed by his golden moustache. Just now, notwithstanding the veneer of his too perfect clothes and civilised air, the beast had leapt out. His face was like the face of a snarling animal.

"I refuse!" he cried. "It is I who refuse! I am here on my own affairs. What they may be is no business of yours or of anyone else's. That is my answer to you, Baron de Grost, whether you come to me for yourself or on behalf of the society to which I no longer belong. That is my answer —that and the door," he added, pressing the bell. "If you will, we fight. If you are wise, forget this visit as quickly as you can."

Peter took up his hat. The manservant was already in the room.

"We shall probably meet again before your return, Monsieur Guillot," he remarked.

Guillot had recovered himself. His smile was wicked, but his bow perfection.

"To the fortunate hour, Monsieur le Baron!" he replied.

Peter drove back to Berkeley Square, and without a moment's hesitation pressed the levers which set in work the whole underground machinery of the great power which he controlled. Thenceforward Monsieur Guillot was surrounded with a vague army of silent watchers. They passed in and out even of his flat, their motor-cars were as fast as his in the streets, their fancy in restaurants identical with his. Guillot moved through it all like a man wholly unconscious of espionage, showing nothing of the murderous anger which burned in his blood. The reports came to Peter every hour, although there was, indeed, nothing worth chronicling. Monsieur Guillot's visit to London would seem, indeed, to be a visit of gallantry. He spent most of his time with Mademoiselle Louise, the famous dancer. He was prominent at the Empire to watch her nightly performance; they were a noticeable couple supping together at the Milan afterwards. Peter smiled as he read the reports. Monsieur Guillot was indeed a man of

gallantry, but he had the reputation of using these affairs to cloak his real purpose. Those who watched him watched only the more closely. Monsieur Guillot, who stood it very well at first, unfortunately lost his temper. He drove to Berkeley Square in the great motor-car which he had brought with him from Paris, and confronted Peter.

"My friend," he exclaimed, though, indeed, the glitter in his eyes knew nothing of friendship. "it is intolerable, this! Do you think that I do not see through these dummy waiters, these obsequious shopmen, these ladies who drop their eyes when I pass, these commissionaires, these would-be acquaintances? I tell you that they irritate me, this incompetent, futile crowd. You pit them against me! Bah! You should know better. When I choose to disappear, I shall disappear, and no one will follow me. When I strike, I shall strike, and no one will discover what my will may be. You are out of date, dear Baron, with your third-rate army of stupid spies. You succeed in one thing only — you succeed in making me angry."

"It is at least an achievement, that," Peter declared.

"Perhaps," Monsieur Guillot admitted fiercely. "Yet mark now the result. I defy you, you and all

of them. Look at your clock. It is five minutes to seven. It goes well, that clock, eh ? "

" It is the correct time," Peter said.

" Then by midnight," Guillot continued, shaking his fist in the other's face, " I shall have done that thing which brought me to England, and I shall have disappeared. I shall have done it in spite of your watchers, in spite of your spies, in spite, even, of you, Monsieur le Baron de Grost. There is my challenge. *Voilà.* Take it up if you will. At midnight you shall hear me laugh. I have the honour to wish you good night ! "

Peter opened the door with his own hands.

" This is excellent," he declared. " You are now, indeed, the Monsieur Guillot of old. Almost you persuade me to take up your challenge."

Guillot laughed derisively.

" As you please ! " he exclaimed. " By midnight to-night ! "

The challenge of Monsieur Guillot was issued precisely at four minutes before seven. On his departure, Peter spent the next half-hour studying certain notes and sending various telephone messages. Afterwards he changed his clothes at the usual time and sat down to a *tête-à-tête* dinner with his wife. Three times during the course of

the meal he was summoned to the telephone, and from each visit he returned more perplexed. Finally, when the servants had left the room, he took his chair round to his wife's side.

"Violet," he said, "you were asking me just now about the telephone. You were quite right. These were not ordinary messages which I have been receiving. I am engaged in a little matter which, I must confess, perplexes me. I want your advice—perhaps your help."

Violet smiled.

"I am quite ready," she announced. "It is a long time since you gave me anything to do."

"You have heard of Guillot?"

She reflected a moment.

"You mean the wonderful Frenchman," she asked, "the head of the criminal department of the Double Four?"

"The man who was at its head when it existed," Peter replied. "The criminal department, as you know, has all been done away with. The Double Four has now no more concern with those who break the law, save in those few instances where great issues demand it."

"But Monsieur Guillot still exists?"

"He not only exists," Peter answered, "but he is here in London, a rebel and a defiant one.

Do you know who came to see me the other morning ? "

She shook her head.

" Sir John Dory," Peter continued. " He came here with a request. He begged for my help. Guillot is here, committed to some enterprise which no man can wholly fathom. Dory has enough to do with other things, as you can imagine, just now. Besides, I think he recognises that Monsieur Guillot is rather a hard nut for the ordinary English detective to crack."

" And you ? " she demanded, breathlessly.

" I join forces with Dory," Peter admitted. " Sogrange agrees with me. Guillot was associated with the Double Four too long for us to have him make scandalous history, either here or in Paris."

" You have seen him ? "

" I have not only seen him," Peter said, " I have declared war against him."

" And he ? "

" Guillot is defiant," Peter replied. " He has been here only this evening. He mocks at me. He swears that he will bring off this enterprise, whatever it may be, before midnight to-night, and he has defied me to stop him."

" But you will," she murmured softly.

Peter smiled. The conviction in his wife's tone

was a subtle compliment which he did not fail to appreciate."

"I have hopes," he confessed, "and yet, let me tell you this, Violet, I have never been more puzzled. Ask yourself, now. What enterprise is there worthy of a man like Guillot, in which he could engage himself here in London between now and midnight? Any ordinary theft is beneath him. The purloining of the Crown jewels, perhaps, he might consider, but I don't think that anything less in the way of robbery would bring him here. He has his code and he is as vain as a peacock. Yet money is at the root of everything he does."

"How does he spend his time here?" Violet asked.

"He has a handsome flat in Shaftesbury Avenue," Peter answered, "where he lives, to all appearance, the life of an idle man of fashion. The whole of his spare time is spent with Mademoiselle Louise, the danseuse at the Empire. You see, it is half-past eight now. I have eleven men altogether at work, and according to my last report he was dining with her in the grillroom at the Milan. They ordered their coffee just ten minutes ago, and the car is waiting outside to take Mademoiselle to the Empire. Guillot's box is engaged there, as usual. If he proposes to occupy it, he is leaving

himself a very narrow margin of time to carry out any enterprise worth speaking of."

Violet was thoughtful for several moments. Then she crossed the room, took up a copy of an illustrated paper, and brought it across to Peter. He smiled as he glanced at the picture to which she pointed, and the few lines underneath.

"It has struck you, too, then!" he exclaimed. "Good! You have answered me exactly as I hoped. Somehow, I scarcely trusted myself. I have both cars waiting outside. We may need them. You won't mind coming to the Empire with me?"

"Mind?" she laughed. "I only hope I may be in at the finish."

"If the finish," Peter remarked, "is of the nature which I anticipate, I shall take particularly good care that you are not."

The curtain was rising upon the first act of the ballet as they entered the music-hall and were shown to the box which Peter had engaged. The house was full—crowded, in fact, almost to excess. They had scarcely taken their seats when a roar of applause announced the coming of Mademoiselle Louise. She stood for a moment to receive her nightly ovation, a slim, beautiful creature, looking out upon the great house with that faint, bewitch-

ing smile at the corners of her lips which every photographer in Europe had striven to reproduce. Then she moved away to the music, an exquisite figure, the personification of all that was alluring in her sex. Violet leaned forward to watch her movements as she plunged into the first dance. Peter was occupied looking round the house. Monsieur Guillot was there, sitting insolently forward in his box, sleek and immaculate. He even waved his hand and bowed as he met Peter's eye. Somehow or other, his confidence had its effect. Peter began to feel vaguely troubled. After all, his plans were built upon a surmise. It was so easy for him to be wrong. No man would show his hand so openly who was not sure of the game. Then his face cleared a little. In the adjoining box to Guillot's the figure of a solitary man was just visible, a man who had leaned over to applaud Louise, but who was now sitting back in the shadows. Peter recognised him at once, notwithstanding the obscurity. This was so much to the good, at any rate. He took up his hat.

"For a quarter of an hour you will excuse me, Violet," he said. "Watch Guillot. If he leaves his place, knock at the door of your box, and one of my men, who is outside, will come to you at once. He will know where to find me."

Peter hurried away, pausing for a moment in the promenade to scribble a line or two at the back of one of his own cards. Presently he knocked at the door of the box adjoining Guillot's and was instantly admitted. Violet continued her watch. She remained alone until the curtain fell upon the first act of the ballet. A few minutes later Peter returned. She knew at once that things were going well. He sank into a chair by her side.

"I have messages every five minutes," he whispered in her ear, "and I am venturing upon a bold stroke. There is still something about the affair, though, which I cannot understand. You are absolutely sure that Guillot has not moved?"

Violet pointed with her programme across the house.

"There he sits," she remarked. "He left his chair as the curtain went down, but he could scarcely have gone out of the box, for he was back within ten seconds."

Peter looked steadily across at the opposite box. Guillot was sitting a little farther back now, as though he no longer courted observation. Something about his attitude puzzled the man who watched him. With a quick movement he caught up the glasses which stood by his wife's side. The curtain was going up

for the second act, and Guillot had turned his head. Peter held the glasses only for a moment to his eyes, and then glanced down at the stage.

"My God!" he muttered. "The man's a genius! Violet, the small motor is coming for you."

He was out of the box in a single step. Violet looked after him, looked down upon the stage and across at Guillot's box. It was hard to understand.

The curtain had scarcely rung up upon the second act of the ballet when a young lady, who met from all the loungers, and even from the doorkeeper himself, the most respectful attention, issued from the stage-door at the Empire and stepped into the large motor-car which was waiting, drawn up against the kerb. The door was opened from inside and closed at once. She held out her hands, as yet ungloved, to the man who sat back in the corner.

"At last!" she murmured. "And I thought that you had forsaken me. It seemed, indeed, dear one, that you had forsaken me."

He took her hands and held them tightly, but he answered only in a whisper. He wore a sombre black cloak and a broad-brimmed hat. A muffler concealed the lower part of his face. She put her

finger upon the electric light, but he stopped her.

"I must not be recognised," he said thickly. "Forgive me, Louise, if I seem strange at first, but there is more in it than I can tell you. No one must know that I am in London to-night. When we reach this place to which you are taking me, and we are really alone, then we can talk. I have so much to say."

She looked at him doubtfully. It was indeed a moment of indecision with her. Then she began to laugh softly.

"Little one, but you have changed!" she exclaimed compassionately. "After all, why not? I must not forget that things have gone so hardly with you. It seems odd, indeed, to see you sitting there, muffled up like an old man, afraid to show yourself. You know how foolish you are? With your black cape and that queer hat, you are so different from all the others. If you seek to remain unrecognised, why do you not dress as all the men do? Anyone who was suspicious would recognise you from your clothes."

"It is true," he muttered. "I did not think of it."

She leaned towards him.

"You will not even kiss me?" she murmured.

"Not yet," he answered.

She made a little grimace.

"But you are cold!"

"You do not understand," he answered. "They are watching me—even to-night they are watching me. Oh, if you only knew, Louise, how I have longed for this hour that is to come!"

Her vanity was assuaged. She patted his hand, but came no nearer.

"You are a foolish little one," she said, "very foolish."

"It is not for you to say that," he replied. "If I have been foolish, were not you often the cause of my folly."

Again she laughed.

"Oh, la, la! It is always the same! It is always you men who accuse! For that presently I shall reprove you. But now—as for now, behold, we have arrived!"

"It is a crowded thoroughfare," the man remarked nervously, looking up and down Shaftesbury Avenue.

"Stupid!" she cried, stepping out. "I do not recognise you to-night, little one. Even your voice is different. Follow me quickly across the pavement and up the stairs. There is only one flight. The flat I have borrowed is on the second

floor. I do not care very much that people should recognise me either, under the circumstances. There is nothing they love so much," she added, with a toss of the head, "as finding an excuse to have my picture in the paper."

He followed her down the dim hall and up the broad, flat stairs, keeping always some distance behind. On the first landing she drew a key from her pocket and opened a door. It was the door of Monsieur Guillot's sitting-room. A round table in the middle was laid for supper. One light alone, and that heavily shaded, was burning.

"Oh, la, la," she exclaimed. "How I hate this darkness! Wait till I can turn on the lights, dear friend, and then you must embrace me. It is from outside, I believe. No, do not follow. I can find the switch for myself. Remain where you are. I return instantly."

She left him alone in the room, closing the door softly. In the passage she reeled for a moment and caught at her side. She was very pale. Guillot, coming swiftly up the steps, frowned as he saw her.

"He is there?" he demanded harshly.

"He is there," Louise replied; "but, indeed, I am angry with myself. See, I am faint. It is a terrible thing, this, which I have done. He did

me no harm, that young man, except that he was stupid and heavy, and that I never loved him. Who could love him, indeed? But, Guillot——"

He passed on, scarcely heeding her words, but she clung to his arm.

"Dear one," she begged, "promise that you will not really hurt him. Promise me that, or I will shriek out and call the people from the streets here. You will not make an assassin of me? Promise!"

Guillot turned suddenly towards her, and there were strange things in his face. He pointed down the stairs.

"Go back, Louise," he ordered, "back to your rooms, for your own sake. Remember that you left the theatre, too ill to finish your performance. You have had plenty of time already to get home. Quick! Leave me to deal with this young man. I tell you to go."

She retreated down the stairs, dumb, her knees shaking still as though with fear. Guillot entered the room, closing the door behind him. Even as he bowed to that dark figure standing in the corner, his left hand shot forward the bolt.

"Monsieur," he said.

"What is the meaning of this?" the visitor interrupted haughtily. "I am expecting Made-

moiselle Louise. I did not understand that strangers had the right of entry into this room."

Guillot bowed low.

"Monsieur," he said once more, "it is a matter for my eternal regret that I am forced to intrude even for a moment upon an assignation so romantic. But there is a little matter which must first be settled. I have some friends here who have a thing to say to you."

He walked softly, with catlike tread, along by the wall to where the thick curtains shut out the inner apartment. He caught at the thick velvet, dragged it back, and the two rooms were suddenly flooded with light. In the recently discovered one, two stalwart-looking men in plain clothes, but of very unmistakable appearance, were standing waiting. Guillot staggered back. They were strangers to him. He was like a man who looks upon a nightmare. His eyes protruded. The words which he tried to utter failed him. Then, with a swift, nervous presentiment, he turned quickly around towards the man who had been standing in the shadows. Here, too, the unexpected had happened. It was Peter, Baron de Grost, who threw his muffler and broad-brimmed hat upon the table.

"Five minutes to eleven, I believe, Monsieur

Guillot," Peter declared. "I win by an hour and five minutes."

Guillot said nothing for several seconds. After all, though, he had great gifts. He recovered alike his power of speech and his composure.

"These gentlemen," he said, pointing with his left hand towards the inner room. "I do not understand their presence in my apartments."

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"They represent, I am afraid, the obvious end of things," he explained. "You have given me a run for my money, I confess. A Monsieur Guillot who is remarkably like you still occupies your box at the Empire, and Mademoiselle Jeanne Lemère, the accomplished understudy of the lady who has just left us, is sufficiently like the incomparable Louise to escape, perhaps, detection for the first few minutes. But you gave the game away a little, my dear Guillot, when you allowed your quarry to come and gaze even from the shadows of his box at the woman he adored."

"Where is—he?" Guillot faltered.

"He is on his way back to his country home," Peter replied. "I think that he will be cured of his infatuation for Mademoiselle. The assassins whom you planted in that room are by this time in Bow Street. The price which others beside you

knew, my dear Guillot, was placed upon that unfortunate young man's head will not pass this time into your pocket. For the rest——"

"The rest is of no consequence," Guillot interrupted, bowing. "I admit that I am vanquished. As for those gentlemen there," he added, waving his hand towards the two men, who had taken a step forward, "I have a little oath which is sacred to me concerning them. I take the liberty, therefore, to admit myself defeated, Monsieur le Baron, and to take my leave."

No one was quick enough to interfere. They had only a glimpse of him as he stood there with the revolver pressed to his temple, an impression of a sharp report, of Guillot staggering back as the revolver slipped from his fingers on to the floor. Even his death cry was stifled. They carried him away without any fuss, and Peter was just in time, after all, to see the finish of the second act of the ballet. The sham Monsieur Guillot still smirked at the sham Louise, but the box by his side was empty.

"Is it over?" Violet asked breathlessly.

"It is over," Peter answered.

It was, after all, an unrecorded tragedy. In an obscure corner of the morning papers one learned the next day that a Frenchman, who had

apparently come to the end of his means, had committed suicide in a furnished flat in Shaftesbury Avenue. Two foreigners were deported without having been brought up for trial, for being suspected persons. A little languid interest was aroused at the inquest when one of the witnesses deposed to the deceased having been a famous French criminal. Nothing further transpired, however, and the readers of the halfpenny press for once were deprived of their sensation. For the rest, Peter received, with much satisfaction, a remarkably handsome signet ring, bearing some famous arms, and a telegram from Sogrange: "*Well done, Baron! May the successful termination of your enterprise nerve you for the greater undertaking which is close at hand. I leave for London by the night train.*—SOGRANGE."

CHAPTER X

THE THIRTEENTH ENCOUNTER

THE Marquis de Sogrange arrived in Berkeley Square with the grey dawn of an October morning, showing in his appearance and dress few enough signs of his night journey. Yet he had travelled without stopping from Paris by fast motor car and the mail boat.

"They telephoned me from Charing Cross," Peter said, "that you could not possibly arrive until midday. The clerk assured me that no train had yet reached Calais."

"They had reason in what they told you," Sogrange remarked, as he leaned back in a chair and sipped the coffee which had been waiting for him in the Baron de Grost's study. "The train itself never got more than a mile away from the Gare du Nord. The engine-driver was shot through the head, and the metals were torn from the way. Paris is within a year now of a second and more terrible revolution."

"You really believe this?" Peter asked gravely.

"It is a certainty," Sograngе replied. "Not I alone, but many others can see this clearly. Everywhere the Socialists have wormed themselves into places of trust. They are to be met with in every rank of life, under every form of disguise. The post-office strike has already shown us what deplorable disasters even a skirmish can bring about. To-day the railway strike has paralysed France. Our country lies to-day absolutely at the mercy of any invader. As it happens, no one is, for the moment, prepared. Who can tell how it may be next time?"

"This is bad news," Peter declared. "If this is really the position of affairs, the matter is much more serious than the newspapers would have us believe."

"The newspapers," Sograngе muttered, "ignore what lies behind. Some of them, I think, are paid to do it. As for the rest, our Press had always an ostrich-like tendency. The Frenchman of the café does not buy his journal to be made sad."

"You believe, then," Peter asked, "that these strikes have some definite tendency?"

Sograngе set down his cup and smiled bitterly. In the early sunlight, still a little cold and unloving,

Peter could see that there was a change in the man. He was no longer the debonair aristocrat of the racecourses and the boulevards. The shadows under his eyes were deeper, his cheeks more sunken. He had lost something of the sprightliness of his bearing. His attitude, indeed, was almost dejected. He was like a man who sees into the future and finds there strange and gruesome things.

"I do more than believe that," he declared. "I know it. It has fallen to my lot to make a very definite discovery concerning them. Listen, my friend. For more than six months the Government has been trying to discover the source of this stream of vile socialistic literature which has contaminated the French working classes. The pamphlets have been distributed with devilish ingenuity amongst all national operatives, the army and the navy. The Government has failed. The Double Four has succeeded."

"You have really discovered their source?" Peter exclaimed.

"Without a doubt," Sogrange assented. "The Government appealed to us first some months ago when I was in America. For a time we had no success. Then a clue, and the rest was easy. The navy, the army, the post-office employees, the telegraph and telephone operators, and the railway

men, have been the chief recipients of this incessant stream of foul literature. To-day one cannot tell how much mischief has been actually done. The strikes which have already occurred are only the mutterings of the coming storm. But mark you, wherever those pamphlets have gone, trouble has followed. What men may do, the Government is doing, but all the time the poison is at work, the seed has been sown. Two millions of money have been spent to corrupt that very class which should be the backbone of France. Through the fingers of one man has come this shower of gold, one man alone has stood at the head of the great organisation which has disseminated this loathsome disease. Behind him—well, we know."

"The man?"

"It is fitting that you should ask that question," Sograngе replied. "The name of that man is Bernadine, Count von Hern."

Peter remained speechless. There was something almost terrible in the slow preciseness with which Sograngе had uttered the name of his enemy, something unspeakably threatening in the cold glitter of his angry eyes.

"Up to the present," Sograngе continued, "I have watched—sympathetically, of course, but with a certain amount of amusement—the duel

between you and Bernadine. It has been against your country and your country's welfare that most of his efforts have been directed, which perhaps accounts for the equanimity with which I have been contented to remain a looker-on. It is apparent, my dear Baron, that in most of your encounters the honours have remained with you. Yet, as it has chanced, never once has Bernadine been struck a real and crushing blow. The time has come when this and more must happen. It is no longer a matter of polite exchanges. It is a *duel à outrance.*"

"You mean——" Peter began.

"I mean that Bernadine must die," Sogrange declared.

There was a brief silence. Outside, the early morning street noises were increasing in volume as the great army of workers, streaming towards the heart of the city from a hundred suburbs, passed on to their tasks. A streak of sunshine had found its way into the room, lay across the carpet, and touched Sogrange's still, waxen features. Peter glanced half fearfully at his friend and visitor. He himself was no coward, no shrinker from the great issues. He, too, had dealt in life and death. Yet there was something in the deliberate preciseness of Sogrange's words, as he sat there only a few feet away, which was unspeakably thrilling. It was

like a death sentence pronounced in all solemnity upon some shivering criminal. There was something inevitable and tragical about the whole affair. A pronouncement had been made from which there was no appeal. Bernadine was to die!

"Isn't this a little exceeding the usual exercise of our powers?" Peter asked slowly.

"No such occasion as this has ever yet arisen," Sograngе reminded him. "Bernadine has fled to this country with barely an hour to spare. His offence is extraditable by a law of the last century which has never been repealed. He is guilty of treason against the Republic of France. Yet they do not want him back, they do not want a trial. I have papers upon my person which, if I took them into an English court, would procure for me a warrant for Bernadine's arrest. It is not this we desire. Bernadine must die. No fate could be too terrible for a man who has striven to corrupt the soul of a nation. It is not war, this. It is not honest conspiracy. Is it war, I ask you, to seek to poison the drinking water of an enemy, to send stalking into their midst some loathsome disease? Such things belong to the ages of barbarity. Bernadine has striven to revive them, and Bernadine shall die."

"It is justice," Peter admitted.

"The question remains," Sograngе continued, "by whose hand—yours or mine?"

Peter started uneasily.

"Is that necessary?" he asked.

"I fear that it is," Sograngе replied. "We had a brief meeting of the executive council last night, and it was decided, for certain reasons, to entrust this task into no other hands. You will smile when I tell you that these accursed pamphlets have found their way into the possession of many of the rank and file of our own order. There is a marked disinclination on the part of those who have been our slaves to accept orders from anyone. Espionage we can still command—the best, perhaps, in Europe—because here we use a different class of material. But of those underneath we are, for the moment, doubtful. Paris is all in a ferment. Under its outward seemliness a million throats are ready to take up the brazen cry of revolution. One trusts nobody. One fears all the time."

"You or I!" Peter repeated slowly. "It will not be sufficient, then, that we find Bernadine and deliver him over to your country's laws?"

"It will not be sufficient," Sograngе answered sternly. "From those he may escape. For him there must be no escape."

"Sogrange," Peter said, speaking in a low tone, "I have never yet killed a human being."

"Nor I," Sogrange admitted. "Nor have I yet set my heel upon its head and stamped the life from a rat upon the pavement. But one lives and one moves on. Bernadine is the enemy of your country and mine. He makes war after the fashion of vermin. No ordinary cut-throat would succeed against him. It must be you or I."

"How shall we decide?" Peter asked.

"The spin of a coin," Sogrange replied. "It is best that way. It is best, too, done quickly."

Peter produced a sovereign from his pocket and balanced it on the palm of his hand.

"Let it be understood," Sogrange continued, "that this is a dual undertaking. We toss only for the final honour—for the last stroke. If the choice falls upon me, I shall count upon you to help me to the end. If it falls upon you, I shall be at your right hand even when you strike the blow."

"It is agreed," Peter said. "See, it is for you to call."

He threw the coin high into the air.

"I call heads," Sogrange decided.

It fell upon the table. Peter covered it with his hand, and then slowly withdrew the fingers.

A little shiver ran through his veins. The harmless head that looked up at him was like the figure of death. It was for him to strike the blow!

"Where is Bernadine now?" he asked.

"Get me a morning paper and I will tell you," Sograngе declared, rising. "He was in the train which was stopped outside the Gare du Nord, on his way to England. What became of the passengers I have not heard. I knew what was likely to happen, and I left an hour before in a 100 h.p. Charron."

Peter rang the bell, and ordered the servant who answered it to procure the *Daily Telegraph*. As soon as it arrived, he spread it open upon the table, and Sograngе looked over his shoulder. These are the headings which they saw in large black characters:

RENEWED RIOTS IN PARIS
THE GARE DU NORD IN FLAMES
TERRIBLE ACCIDENT TO THE CALAIS-DOUVRES EXPRESS
MANY DEATHS

Peter's forefinger travelled down the page swiftly. It paused at the following paragraph:—

"The 8.55 train from the Gare du Nord, carrying many passengers for London, after being de-

tained within a mile of Paris for over an hour owing to the murder of the engine-driver, made an attempt last night to proceed, with terrible results. Near Chantilly, whilst travelling at over fifty miles an hour, the points were tampered with, and the express dashed into a goods train laden with minerals. Very few particulars are yet to hand, but the express was completely wrecked, and many lives have been lost. Amongst the dead are the following : "

One by one Peter read out the names. Then he stopped short. A little exclamation broke from Sogrange's lips. The thirteenth name upon that list of dead was the name of Bernadine, Count von Hern.

" Bernadine ! " Peter faltered. " Bernadine is dead ! "

" Killed by the strikers ! " Sogrange echoed. " It is a just thing, this."

The two men looked down at the paper and then up at each other. A strange silence seemed to have found its way into the room. The shadow of death lay between them. Peter touched his forehead and found it wet.

" It is a just thing, indeed," he repeated, " but justice and death are alike terrible."

Late in the afternoon of the same day a motor

car, splashed with mud, drew up before the door of the house in Berkeley Square. Sograngе, who was standing talking to Peter before the library window, suddenly broke off in the middle of a sentence. He stepped back into the room and gripped his friend's shoulder.

"It is the Baroness," he exclaimed quickly. "What does she want here?"

"The Baroness who?" Peter demanded.

"The Baroness von Ratten. You must have heard of her—she is the friend of Bernadine."

The two men had been out to lunch at the Ritz with Violet, and had walked across the Park home. Sograngе had been drawing on his gloves in the act of starting out for a call at the Embassy.

"Does your wife know this woman?" he asked.

Peter shook his head.

"I think not," he replied. "We shall know in a minute."

"Then she has come to see you," Sograngе continued. "What does it mean, I wonder?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

There was a knock at the door, and his servant entered, bearing a card.

"This lady would like to see you, sir, on important business," he said.

"You can show her in here," Peter directed.

There was a very short delay. The two men had no time to exchange a word. They heard the rustling of a woman's gown, and immediately afterward the perfume of violets seemed to fill the room.

"The Baroness von Ratten," the butler announced.

The door closed behind her. The servant had disappeared. Peter advanced to meet his guest. She was a little above medium height, very slim, with extraordinarily fair hair, colourless face, and strange eyes. She was not strictly beautiful, and yet there was no man upon whom her presence was without its effect. Her voice was like her movements, slow, and with a grace of its own.

"You do not mind that I have come to see you?" she asked, raising her eyes to Peter's. "I believe before I go that you will think terrible things of me, but you must not begin before I have told you my errand. It has been a great struggle with me before I made up my mind to come here."

"Won't you sit down, Baroness?" Peter invited.

She saw Sogrange, and hesitated.

"You are not alone," she said softly. "I wish to speak with you alone."

"Permit me to present to you the Marquis de Sogrange," Peter begged. "He is my oldest friend, Baroness. I think that whatever you might have to say to me you might very well say before him."

"It is—of a private nature," she murmured.

"The Marquis and I have no secrets," Peter declared, "either political or private."

She sat down and motioned Peter to take a place by her side upon the sofa.

"You will forgive me if I am a little incoherent," she implored. "To-day I have had a shock. You, too, have read the news? You must know that the Count von Hern is dead—killed in the railway accident last night?"

"We read it in the *Daily Telegraph*," Peter replied.

"It is in all the papers," she continued. "You know that he was a very dear friend of mine?"

"I have heard so," Peter admitted.

"Yet there was one subject," she insisted, earnestly, "upon which we never agreed. He hated England. I have always loved it. England was kind to me when my own country drove me out. I have always felt grateful. It has been a sorrow to me that in so many of his schemes, in so much of his work, Bernadine should consider his own country at the expense of yours."

Sograngе drew a little nearer. It began to be interesting, this.

"I heard the news early this morning by telegram," she went on. "For a long time I was prostrate. Then early this afternoon I began to think—one must always think. Bernadine was a dear friend, but things between us lately have been different, a little strained. Was it his fault or mine —who can say? Does one tire with the years, I wonder? I wonder!"

Her eyes were lifted to his, and Peter was conscious of the fact that she wished him to know that they were beautiful. She looked slowly away again.

"This afternoon, as I sat alone," she proceeded, "I remembered that in my keeping were many boxes of papers and many letters which have recently arrived, all belonging to Bernadine. I reflected that there were certainly some who were in his confidence, and that very soon they would come from his country and take them all away. And then I remembered what I owed to England, and how opposed I always was to Bernadine's schemes, and I thought that the best thing I could do to show my gratitude would be to place his papers all in the hands of some Englishman, so that they might do no more harm to the country which has been kind to me. So I came to you."

Again her eyes were lifted to his, and Peter was very sure indeed that they were wonderfully beautiful. He began to realise the fascination of this woman, of whom he had heard so much. Her very absence of colouring was a charm.

"You mean that you have brought me these papers?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly.

"No," she said, "I could not do that. There were too many of them—they are too heavy, and there are piles of pamphlets—revolutionary pamphlets, I am afraid—all in French, which I do not understand. No, I could not bring them to you. But I ordered my motor-car and I drove up here to tell you that if you like to come down to the house in the country where I have been living—to which Bernadine was to have come to-night—yes, and bring your friend, too, if you will—you shall look through them before anyone else can arrive."

"You are very kind," Peter murmured. "Tell me where it is that you live?"

"It is beyond Hitchin," she told him, "up the Great North Road. I tell you at once, it is a horrible house, in a horrible, lonely spot. Within a day or two I shall leave it myself for ever. I hate it—it gets on my nerves. I dream of all the

terrible things which perhaps have taken place there. Who can tell? It was Bernardine's long before I came to England."

"When are we to come?" Peter asked.

"You must come back with me now, at once," the Baroness insisted. "I cannot tell how soon someone in his confidence may arrive."

"I will order my car," Peter declared.

She laid her hand upon his arm.

"Do you mind coming in mine?" she begged. "It is of no consequence, if you object, but every servant in Bernadine's house is German and a spy. There are no women except my own maid. Your car is likely enough known to them, and there might be trouble. If you will come with me now, you and your friend, if you like, I will send you to the station to-night in time to catch the train home. I feel that I must have this thing off my mind. You will come? Yes?"

Peter rang the bell and ordered his coat.

"Without a doubt," he answered. "May we not offer you some tea first?"

She shook her head.

"To-day I cannot think of eating or drinking," she replied. "Bernadine and I were no longer what we had been, but the shock of his death seems none the less terrible. I feel like a traitor to him for

coming here, yet I believe that I am doing what is right," she added softly.

"If you will excuse me for one moment," Peter said, "while I take leave of my wife, I will rejoin you presently."

Peter was absent for only a few minutes. Sograngе and the Baroness exchanged the merest commonplaces. As they all passed down the hall Sograngе lingered behind.

"If you will take the Baroness out to the car," he suggested, "I will telephone to the Embassy and tell them not to expect me."

Peter offered his arm to his companion. She seemed, indeed, to need support. Her fingers clutched at his coat-sleeve as they passed on to the pavement.

"I am so glad to be no longer quite alone," she whispered. "Almost I wish that your friend were not coming. I know that Bernadine and you were enemies, but then you were enemies not personally but politically. After all, it is you who stand for the things which have become so dear to me."

"It is true that Bernadine and I were bitter antagonists," Peter admitted gravely. "Death, however, ends all that. I wish him no further harm."

She sighed.

"As for me," she said, "I am growing used to being friendless. I was friendless before Bernadine came, and latterly we have been nothing to one another. Now, I suppose, I shall know what it is to be an outcast once more. Did you ever hear my history, I wonder?"

Peter shook his head.

"Never, Baroness," he replied. "I understood, I believe, that your marriage——"

"My husband divorced me," she confessed, simply. "He was quite within his rights. He was impossible. I was very young and very sentimental. They say that Englishwomen are cold," she added. "Perhaps that is so. People think that I look cold. Do you?"

Sograngе suddenly opened the door of the car, in which they were already seated. She leaned back and half closed her eyes.

"It is rather a long ride," she said, "and I am worn out. I hope you will not mind, but for myself I cannot talk when motoring. Smoke, if it pleases you."

"Might one inquire as to our exact destination?" Sograngе asked.

"We go beyond Hitchin, up the Great North Road," she told him again. "The house is called

the High House. It stands in the middle of a heath, and I think it is the loneliest and most miserable place that was ever built. I hate it and am frightened in it. For some reason or other it suited Bernadine, but that is all over now."

The little party of three lapsed into silence. The car, driven carefully enough through the busy streets, gradually increased its pace as they drew clear of the suburbs. Peter leaned back in his place, thinking. Bernadine was dead! Nothing else would have convinced him so utterly of the fact as that simple sentence in the *Daily Telegraph*, which had been followed up by a confirmation and a brief obituary notice in all the evening papers. Curiously enough, the fact seemed to have drawn a certain spice out of even this adventure; to point, indeed, to a certain monotony in the future. Their present enterprise, important though it might turn out to be, was nothing to be proud of. A woman, greedy for gold, was selling her lover's secrets before the breath was out of his body. Peter turned in his cushioned seat to look at her. Without doubt she was beautiful to one who understood, beautiful in a strange, colourless, feline fashion, the beauty of soft limbs, soft movements, a caressing voice with always the promise beyond of more than the actual words. Her eyes now were

closed, her face was a little weary. Did she really rest, Peter wondered. He watched the rising and falling of her bosom, the quivering now and then of her eyelids. She had indeed the appearance of a woman who had suffered.

The car rushed on into the darkness. Behind them lay that restless phantasmagoria of lights streaming to the sky. In front, blank space. Peter, through half-closed eyes, watched the woman by his side. From the moment of her entrance into his library, he had summed her up in his mind with a single word. She was, beyond a doubt, an adventuress. No woman could have proposed the things which she had proposed who was not of that ilk. Yet for that reason it behoved them to have a care in their dealings with her. At her instigation they had set out upon this adventure, which might well turn out according to any fashion that she chose. Yet without Bernadine what could she do ? She was not the woman to carry on the work which he had left behind for the love of him. Her words had been frank, her action shameful, but natural. Bernadine was dead, and she had realised quickly enough the best market for his secrets. In a few days' time his friends would have come and she would have received nothing. He told himself that he was foolish to doubt her.

There was not a flaw in the sequence of events, no possible reason for the suspicions which yet lingered at the back of his brain. Intrigue, it was certain, was to her as the breath of her body. He was perfectly willing to believe that the death of Bernadine would have affected her little more than the sweeping aside of a fly. His very common sense bade him accept her story.

By degrees he became drowsy. Suddenly he was startled into a very wideawake state. Through half-closed eyes he had seen Sogrange draw a sheet of paper from his pocket, a gold pencil from his chain, and commence to write. In the middle of a sentence his eyes were abruptly lifted. He was looking at the Baroness. Peter, too, turned his head; he also looked at the Baroness. Without a doubt she had been watching both of them. Sogrange's pencil continued its task, only he traced no more characters. Instead, he seemed to be sketching a face, which presently he tore carefully up into small pieces and destroyed. He did not even glance towards Peter, but Peter understood very well what had happened. He had been about to send him a message, but had found the Baroness watching. Peter was fully awake now. His faint sense of suspicion had deepened into a positive foreboding. He had a reckless desire to stop the car,

to descend upon the road, and let the secrets of Bernadine go where they would. Then his natural love of adventure blazed up once more. His moment of weakness had passed. The thrill was in his blood, his nerves were tightened. He was ready for what might come, seemingly still half asleep, yet indeed with every sense of intuition and observation keenly alert.

Sogrange leaned over from his place.

"It is a lonely country, this, into which we are coming, madame," he remarked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Indeed, it is not so lonely here as you will think it when we arrive at our destination," she replied. "There are houses here, but they are hidden by the trees. There are no houses near us."

She rubbed the pane with her hand.

"We are, I believe, very nearly there," she said. "This is the nearest village. Afterwards we just climb a hill, and about half a mile along the top of it is the High House."

"And the name of the village?" Sogrange inquired.

"St. Mary's," she told him. "In the summer people call it beautiful around here. To me it is the most melancholy spot I ever saw. There is so much rain, and one hears the drip, drip in the

trees all the day long. Alone I could not bear it. To-morrow or the next day I shall pack up my belongings and come to London. I am, unfortunately," she added, with a little sigh, "very, very poor, but it is my hope that you may find the papers of which I have spoken to you valuable."

Sogrange smiled faintly. Peter and he could scarcely forbear to exchange a single glance. The woman's candour was almost brutal.

She read their thoughts.

"We ascend the hill," she continued. "We draw now very near to the end of our journey. There is still one thing I would say to you. Do not think too badly of me for what I am about to do. To Bernadine, whilst he lived, I was faithful. Many a time I could have told you of his plans and demanded a great sum of money, and you would have given it me willingly, but my lips were sealed because, in a way, I loved him. While he lived I gave him what I owed. To-day he is dead, and whatever I do it cannot concern him any more. To-day I am a free woman, and I take the side I choose."

Sogrange smiled suavely.

"Dear Madame," he replied, "what you have proposed to us is, after all, quite natural and very gracious. If one has a fear at all about the matter,

it is as to the importance of these documents you speak of. Bernadine, I know, has dealt in great affairs, but he was a diplomat by instinct, experienced and calculating. One does not keep incriminating papers."

She leaned a little forward. The car had swung round a corner now and was making its way up an avenue as dark as pitch.

"The wisest of us, Monsieur le Marquis," she whispered, "reckon sometimes without that one element of sudden death. What should you say, I wonder, to a list of agents in France pledged to circulate in certain places literature of an infamous sort? What should you say, monsieur, to a copy of a secret report of your late manœuvres, franked with the name of one of your own staff officers? What should you say," she went on, "to a list of Socialist deputies with amounts against their names, amounts paid in hard cash? Are these of no importance to you?"

"Madame," Sograngé answered simply, "for such information, if it were genuine, it would be hard to mention a price which we should not be prepared to pay."

The car came to a sudden standstill. The first impression of the two men was that the Baroness had exaggerated the loneliness and desolation of

the place. There was nothing mysterious or forbidding about the plain brown stone house before which they had stopped. The windows were streaming with light; the hall door, already thrown open, disclosed a very comfortable hall, brilliantly illuminated. A man-servant assisted his mistress to alight, another ushered them in. In the background were other servants. The Baroness glanced at the clock.

"About dinner, Carl?" she asked.

"It waits for Madame," the man answered.

She nodded.

"Take care of these gentlemen till I descend," she ordered. "You will not mind?" she added, turning pleadingly to Sogrange. "To-day I have eaten nothing. I am faint with hunger. Afterwards, it will be a matter of but half an hour. You can be in London again by ten o'clock."

"As you will, madame," Sogrange replied. "We are greatly indebted to you for your hospitality. But for costume, you understand that we are as we are?"

"It is perfectly understood," she assured him. "For myself, I rejoin you in ten minutes. A loose gown, that is all."

Sogrange and Peter were shown into a modern bathroom by a servant who was so anxious to wait

upon them that they had difficulty in sending him away. As soon as he was gone and the door closed behind him, Peter put his foot against it and turned the key.

"You were going to write something to me in the car?"

Sogrange nodded.

"There was a moment," he admitted, "when I had a suspicion. It has passed. This woman is no Roman. She sells the secrets of Bernadine as she would sell herself. Nevertheless, it is well always to be prepared. There were probably others beside Bernadine who had the entrée here."

"The only suspicious circumstance which I have noticed," Peter remarked, "is the number of men-servants. I have seen five already."

"It is only fair to remember," Sogrange reminded him, "that the Baroness herself told us that there were no other save men-servants here and that they were all spies. Without a master, I cannot see that they are dangerous. One needs, however, to watch all the time."

"If you see anything suspicious," Peter said, "tap the table with your forefinger. Personally, I will admit that I have had my doubts of the Baroness, but, on the whole, I have come to the conclusion that they were groundless. She is not

the sort of woman to take up a vendetta, especially an unprofitable one."

"She is an exceedingly dangerous person for an impressionable man like myself," Sograngе remarked, arranging his tie.

The butler fetched them in a very few moments and showed them into a pleasantly furnished library, where he mixed cocktails for them from a collection of bottles upon the sideboard. He was quite friendly, and inclined to be loquacious, although he spoke with a slight foreign accent. The house belonged to an English gentleman, from whom the honoured Count had taken it, furnished. They were two miles from a station and a mile from the village. It was a lonely part, but there were always people coming or going. With one's work one scarcely noticed it. He was gratified that the gentlemen found his cocktails so excellent. Perhaps he might be permitted the high honour of mixing them another ? It was a day, this, of deep sadness and gloom. One needed to drink something, indeed, to forget the terrible thing which had happened. The Count had been a good master, a little impatient sometimes, but kind-hearted. The news had been a shock to them all.

Then, before they had expected her, the Baroness reappeared. She wore a wonderful grey

gown which seemed to be made in a single piece, a gown which fitted her tightly, and yet gave her the curious appearance of a woman walking without the burden of clothes. Sogrange, Parisian to the finger-tips, watched her with admiring approval. She laid her fingers upon his arm, although it was towards Peter that her eyes travelled.

"Will you take me in, Marquis?" she begged. "It is the only formality we will allow ourselves."

They entered a long, low dining-room, panelled with oak, and with the family portraits of the owner of the house still left upon the walls. Dinner was served upon a round table, and was laid for four. There was a profusion of silver, very beautiful glass, and a wonderful cluster of orchids. The Marquis, as he handed his hostess to her chair, glanced towards the vacant place.

"It is for my companion, an Austrian lady," she explained. "To-night, however, I think that she will not come. She was a distant connection of Bernadine's, and she is much upset. We leave her place and see. You will sit on my other side, Baron."

The fingers which touched Peter's arm brushed his hand, and were withdrawn as though with reluctance. She sank into her chair with a little sigh.

"It is charming of you two, this," she declared softly. "You help me through this night of solitude and sadness. What I should do if I were alone, I cannot tell. You must drink with me a toast, if you will. Will you make it to our better acquaintance?"

No soup had been offered, and champagne was served with the *hors d'œuvres*. Peter raised his glass, and looked into the eyes of the woman who was leaning so closely towards him that her soft breath fell upon his cheek. She whispered something in his ear. For a moment, perhaps, he was carried away, but for a moment only. Then Sogrange's voice and the beat of his forefinger upon the table stiffened him into sudden alertness. They heard a motor-car draw up outside.

"Who can it be?" the Baroness exclaimed, setting her glass down abruptly.

"It is, perhaps, the other guest who arrives," Sogrange remarked.

They all three listened, Peter and Sogrange with their glasses still suspended in the air.

"The other guest?" the Baroness repeated. "Madame von Estenier is upstairs, lying down. I cannot tell who this may be."

Her lips were parted. The lines of her forehead had suddenly appeared. Her eyes were turned

toward the door, hard and bright. Then the glass which she had nervously picked up again and was holding between her fingers, fell on to the table-cloth with a little crash, and the yellow wine ran bubbling on to her plate. Her scream echoed to the roof and rang through the room. It was Bernadine who stood there in the doorway, Bernadine in a long travelling ulster and the air of one newly arrived from a journey. They all three looked at him, but there was not one who spoke. The Baroness, after her one wild cry, was dumb.

"I am indeed fortunate," Bernadine said. "You have as yet, I see, scarcely commenced. You probably expected me. I am charmed to find so agreeable a party awaiting my arrival."

He divested himself of his ulster and threw it across the arm of the butler who stood behind him

"Come," he continued, "for a man who has just been killed in a railway accident, I find myself with an appetite. A glass of wine, Carl. I do not know what that toast was the drinking of which my coming interrupted, but let us all drink it together. Aimée, my love to you, dear. Let me congratulate you upon the fortitude and courage with which you have ignored those lying reports of my death. I had fears that I might find you alone in a darkened room, with tear-stained eyes

and sal-volatile by your side. This is infinitely better. Gentlemen, you are welcome."

Sogrange lifted his glass and bowed courteously. Peter followed suit.

"Really," Sogrange murmured, "the Press nowadays, becomes more unreliable every day. It is apparent, my dear von Hern, that this account of your death was, to say the least of it, exaggerated."

Peter said nothing. His eyes were fixed upon the Baroness. She sat in her chair quite motionless, but her face had become like the face of some graven image. She looked at Bernadine, but her eyes said nothing. Every glint of expression seemed to have left her features. Since that one wild shriek she had remained voiceless. Encompassed by danger though he knew that they now must be, Peter found himself possessed by one thought and one thought only. Was this a trap into which they had fallen, or was the woman, too, deceived?

"You bring later news from Paris than I myself," Sogrange proceeded, helping himself to one of the dishes which a footman was passing round. "How did you reach the coast? The evening papers stated distinctly that since the accident no attempt had been made to run trains."

"By motor-car from Chantilly," Bernadine replied. "I had the misfortune to lose my servant, who was wearing my coat, and who, I gather from the newspaper reports, was mistaken for me. I myself was unhurt. I hired a motor-car and drove to Boulogne—not the best of journeys, let me tell you, for we broke down three times. There was no steamer there, but I hired a fishing boat, which brought me across the Channel in something under eight hours. From the coast I motored direct here. I was so anxious," he added, raising his eyes, "to see how my dear friend—my dear Aimée—was bearing the terrible news."

She fluttered for a moment like a bird in a trap. Peter drew a little sigh of relief. His self-respect was reinstated. He had decided that she was innocent. Upon them, at least, would not fall the ignominy of having been led into the simplest of traps by this white-faced Delilah. The butler had brought her another glass, which she raised to her lips. She drained its contents, but the ghastliness of her appearance remained unchanged. Peter, watching her, knew the signs. She was sick with terror.

"The conditions throughout France are indeed awful," Sograngе remarked. "They say, too, that this railway strike is only the beginning of worse things."

Bernadine smiled.

"Your country, my dear Marquis," he said, "is on its last legs. No one knows better than I that it is, at the present moment, honeycombed with sedition and anarchical impulses. The people are rotten. For years the whole tone of France has been decadent. Its fall must even now be close at hand."

"You take a gloomy view of my country's future," Sogrange declared.

"Why should one refuse to face facts?" Bernadine replied. "One does not often talk so frankly, but we three are met together this evening under somewhat peculiar circumstances. The days of the glory of France are past. England has laid out her neck for the yoke of the conqueror. Both are doomed to fall. Both are ripe for the great humiliation. You two gentlemen whom I have the honour to receive as my guests," he concluded, filling his glass and bowing towards them, "in your present unfortunate predicament represent precisely the position of your two countries."

"*Ave Cæsar!*" Peter muttered grimly, raising his glass to his lips.

Bernadine accepted the challenge.

"It is not I, alas! who may call myself Cæsar,"

he replied, "although it is certainly you who are about to die."

Sogrange turned to the man who stood behind his chair.

"If I might trouble you for a little dry toast?" he inquired. "A modern, but very uncomfortable, ailment," he added, with a sigh. "One's digestion must march with the years, I suppose."

Bernadine smiled.

"Your toast you shall have, with pleasure, Marquis," he said, "but as for your indigestion, do not let that trouble you any longer. I think that I can promise you immunity from that annoying complaint for the rest of your life."

"You are doing your best," Peter declared, leaning back in his chair, "to take away my appetite."

Bernadine looked searchingly from one to the other of his two guests.

"Yes," he admitted, "you are brave men. I do not know why I should ever have doubted it. Your pose is excellent. I have no wish, however, to see you buoyed up by a baseless optimism. A somewhat remarkable chance has delivered you into my hands. You are my prisoners. You, Peter Baron de Grost, I have hated all my days. You have stood between me and the achievement

of some of my most dearly cherished tasks. Always I have said to myself that the day of reckoning must come. It has arrived. As for you, Marquis de Sogrange, if my personal feelings towards you are less violent, you still represent the things absolutely inimical to me and my interests. The departure of you two men was the one thing necessary for the successful completion of certain tasks which I have in hand at the present moment."

Peter pushed away his plate.

"You have succeeded in destroying my appetite, Count," he declared. "Now that you have gone so far in expounding your amiable resolutions towards us, perhaps you will go a little farther and explain exactly how, in this eminently respectable house, situated, I understand, in an eminently respectable neighbourhood, with a police station within a mile, and a dozen or so witnesses as to our present whereabouts, you intend to expedite our removal?"

Bernadine pointed towards the woman who sat facing him.

"Ask the Baroness how these things are arranged."

They turned towards her. She fell back in her chair with a little gasp. She had fainted. Bernadine shrugged his shoulders. The butler and

one of the footmen, who during the whole of the conversation had stolidly proceeded with their duties, in obedience to a gesture from their master, took her up in their arms and carried her from the room.

"The fear has come to her, too," Bernadine murmured softly. "It may come to you, my brave friends, before morning."

"It is possible," Peter answered, his hand stealing round to his hip pocket, "but in the meantime, what is to prevent——"

The hip pocket was empty. Peter's sentence ended abruptly. Bernadine mocked him.

"To prevent your shooting me in cold blood, I suppose," he remarked. "Nothing except that my servants are too clever. No one save myself is allowed to remain under this roof with arms in their possession. Your pocket was probably picked before you had been in the place five minutes. No, my dear Baron, let me assure you that escape will not be so easy. You were always just a little inclined to be led away by the fair sex. The best men in the world, you know, have shared that failing, and the Baroness, alone and unprotected, had her attractions, eh?"

Then something happened to Peter which had happened to him barely a dozen times in his life.

He lost his temper, and lost it rather badly. Without an instant's hesitation, he caught up the decanter which stood by his side and flung it in his host's face. Bernadine only partly avoided it by thrusting out his arms. The neck caught his forehead and the blood came streaming over his tie and collar. Peter had followed the decanter with a sudden spring. His fingers were upon Bernadine's throat, and he thrust his head back. Sogrange sprang to the door to lock it, but he was too late. The room seemed full of men-servants. Peter was dragged away, still struggling fiercely.

"Tie them up!" Bernadine gasped, swaying in his chair. "Tie them up, do you hear? Carl, give me brandy."

He swallowed half a wineglassful of the raw spirit. His eyes were red with fury.

"Take them to the gun-room," he ordered, "three of you to each of them, mind. I'll shoot the man who lets either escape."

But Peter and Sogrange were both of them too wise to expend any more of their strength in a useless struggle. They suffered themselves to be conducted without resistance across the white stone hall, down a long passage, and into a room at the end, the window and fireplace of which were both

blocked up. The floor was of red flags and the walls whitewashed. The only furniture was a couple of kitchen chairs and a long table. The door was of stout oak and fitted with a double lock. The sole outlet, so far as they could see, was a small round hole at the top of the roof. The door was locked behind them. They were alone.

"The odd trick to Bernadine!" Peter exclaimed hoarsely, wiping a spot of blood from his forehead. "My dear Marquis, I scarcely know how to apologise. It is not often that I lose my temper so completely."

"The matter seems to be of very little consequence," Sogrange answered. "This was probably our intended destination in any case. Seems to be rather an unfortunate expedition of ours, I am afraid."

"One cannot reckon upon men coming back from the dead," Peter declared. "It isn't often that you find every morning and every evening paper mistaken. As for the woman, I believe in her. She honestly meant to sell us those papers of Bernadine's. I believe that she, too, will have to face a day of reckoning."

Sogrange strolled around the room, subjecting it everywhere to a close scrutiny. The result was

hopeless. There was no method of escape save through the door.

"There is certainly something strange about this apartment," Peter remarked. "It is, to say the least of it, unusual to have windows in the roof and a door of such proportions. All the same, I think that those threats of Bernadine's were a little strained. One cannot get rid of one's enemies nowadays in the old-fashioned, melodramatic way. Bernadine must know quite well that you and I are not the sort of men to walk into a trap of anyone's setting, just as I am quite sure that he is not the man to risk even a scandal by breaking the law openly."

"You interest me," Sogrange said. "I begin to suspect that you, too, have made some plans."

"But naturally," Peter replied. "Once before Bernadine set a trap for me, and he nearly had a chance of sending me for a swim in the Thames. Since then one takes precautions as a matter of course. We were followed down here, and by this time I should imagine that the alarm is given. If all was well I was to have telephoned an hour ago."

"You are really," Sogrange declared, "quite an agreeable companion, my dear Baron. You think of everything."

The door was suddenly opened. Bernadine stood upon the threshold and behind him several of the servants.

"You will oblige me by stepping back into the study, my friends," he ordered.

"With great pleasure," Sograngé answered with alacrity. "We have no fancy for this room, I can assure you."

Once more they crossed the stone hall and entered the room into which they had first been shown. On the threshold Peter stopped short and listened. It seemed to him that from somewhere upstairs he could hear the sound of a woman's sobs. He turned to Bernadine.

"The Baroness is not unwell, I trust?" he asked.

"The Baroness is as well as she is likely to be for some time," Bernadine replied grimly.

They were all in the study now. Upon a table stood a telephone instrument. Bernadine drew a small revolver from his pocket.

"Baron de Grost," he said, "I find that you are not quite such a fool as I thought you. Some one is ringing up for you on the telephone. You will reply that you are well and safe, and that you will be home as soon as your business here is finished. Your wife is at the other end. If you breathe a single word to her of your approaching end, she

shall hear through the telephone the sound of the revolver shot that sends you to hell."

"Dear me," Peter protested, "I find this most unpleasant. If you'll excuse me, I don't think I'll answer the call at all."

"You will answer it as I have directed," Bernadine insisted. "Only remember this, if you speak a single ill-advised word, the end will be as I have said."

Peter picked up the receiver and held it to his ear.

"Who is there?" he asked.

It was Violet whose voice he heard. He listened for a moment to her anxious flood of questions.

"There is not the slightest cause to be alarmed, dear," he said. "Yes, I am down at the High House, near St. Mary's. Bernadine is here. It seems that those reports of his death were absolutely unfounded. Danger? Unprotected? Why, my dear Violet, you know how careful I always am. Simply because Bernadine used once to live here, and because the Baroness was his friend, I spoke to Sir John Dory over the telephone before we left, and an escort of half a dozen police followed us. They are about the place now, I have no doubt, but their presence is quite unnecessary. I shall be home before long, dear. Yes, perhaps it would be

as well to send the car down. Anyone will direct him to the house—the High House, St. Mary's, remember. Good-bye!"

Peter replaced the receiver and turned slowly round. Bernadine was smiling.

"You did well to reassure your wife, even though it was a pack of lies you told her," he remarked.

Peter shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"My dear Bernadine," he said, "up till now I have tried to take you seriously. You are really passing the limit. I must positively ask you to reflect a little. Do men who live the life that you and I live trust anyone? Am I, is the Marquis de Sograngе here, after a lifetime of experience, likely to leave the safety of our homes in company with a lady of whom we knew nothing except that she was your companion, without precautions? I do you the justice to believe you are a person of common sense. I know that we are as safe in this house as we should be in our own. War cannot be made in this fashion in an over-policed country like England."

"Do not be too sure," Bernadine replied. "There are secrets about this house which have not yet been disclosed to you. There are means, my dear Baron, of transporting you into a world

where you are likely to do much less harm than here, means ready at hand which would leave no more trace behind than those crumbling ashes can tell of the coal-mine from which they came."

Peter preserved his attitude of bland incredulity.

"Listen," he said, drawing a whistle from his pocket, "it is just possible that you are in earnest. I will bet you, then, if you like, a hundred pounds, that if I blow this whistle you will either have to open your door within five minutes or find your house invaded by the police."

No one spoke for several moments. The veins were standing out upon Bernadine's forehead.

"We have had enough of this folly," he cried. "If you refuse to realise your position, so much the worse for you. Blow your whistle, if you will. I am content."

Peter waited for no second bidding. He raised the whistle to his lips and blew it, loudly and persistently. Again there was silence. Bernadine mocked him.

"Try once more, dear Baron," he advised. "Your friends are perhaps a little hard of hearing. Try once more, and when you have finished, you and I and the Marquis de Sograngе will find our way once more to the gun-room and conclude that trifling matter of business which brought you here."

Again Peter blew his whistle and again the silence was broken only by Bernadine's laugh. Suddenly, however, that laugh was checked. Everyone had turned toward the door, listening. A bell was ringing throughout the house.

"It is the front door," one of the servants exclaimed.

No one moved. As though to put the matter beyond doubt, there was a steady knocking to be heard from the same direction.

"It is a telegram or some late caller," Bernadine declared, hoarsely. "Answer it, Carl. If anyone would speak with the Baroness, she is indisposed and unable to receive. If anyone desires me, I am here."

The man left the room. They heard him withdraw the chain from the door. Bernadine wiped the sweat from his forehead as he listened. He still gripped the revolver in his hand. Peter had changed his position a little, and was standing now behind a high-backed chair. They heard the door creak open, a voice outside, and presently the tramp of heavy footsteps. Peter nodded understandingly.

"It is exactly as I told you," he said. "You were wise not to bet, my friend."

Again the tramp of feet in the hall. There was

something unmistakable about the sound, something final and terrifying. Bernadine saw his triumph slipping away. Once more this man, who had defied him so persistently, was to taste the sweets of victory. With a roar of fury he sprang across the room. He fired his revolver twice before Sograngе, with a terrible blow, knocked his arm upwards and sent the weapon spinning to the ceiling. Peter struck his assailant in the mouth, but the blow seemed scarcely to check him. They rolled on the floor together, their arms around one another's necks. It was an affair, that, but of a moment. Peter, as lithe as a cat, was on his feet again almost at once, with a torn collar and an ugly mark on his face. There were strangers in the room now, and the servants had mostly slipped away during the confusion. It was Sir John Dory himself who locked the door. Bernadine struggled slowly to his feet. He was face to face with half a dozen police-constables in plain clothes.

"You have a charge against this man, Baron?" the police commissioner asked.

Peter shook his head.

"The quarrel between us," he replied, "is not for the police courts, although I will confess, Sir John, that your intervention was opportune."

"I, on the other hand," Sograngе put in,

" demand the arrest of the Count von Hern and the seizure of all papers in this house. I am the bearer of an autograph letter from the President of France in connection with this matter. The Count von Hern has committed extraditable offences against my country. I am prepared to swear an information to that effect."

The police commissioner turned to Peter.

" Your friend's name ? " he demanded.

" The Marquis de Sogrange," Peter told him.

" He is a person of authority ? "

" To my certain knowledge," Peter replied, " he has the implicit confidence of the French Government."

Sir John Dory made a sign. In another moment Bernadine would have been arrested. It seemed, indeed, as though nothing could save him now from this crowning humiliation. He himself, white and furious, was at a loss how to deal with an unexpected situation. Suddenly a thing happened stranger than any one of them there had ever known or dreamed of, so strange that even men such as Peter, Sogrange and Dory, whose nerves were of iron, faced one another, doubting and amazed. The floor beneath them rocked and billowed like the waves of a canvas sea. The

windows were filled with flashes of red light, a great fissure parted the wall, the pictures and book-cases came crashing down beneath a shower of masonry. It was the affair of a second. Above them shone the stars and around them a noise like thunder. Bernadine, who alone understood, was the first to recover himself. He stood in the midst of them, his hands above his head, laughing as he looked around at the strange storm—laughing like a madman.

"The wonderful Carl!" he cried. "Oh, matchless servant! Arrest me now, if you will, you dogs of the police. Rout out my secrets, dear Baron de Grost. Tuck them under your arm and hurry to Downing Street. This is the hospitality of the High House, my friends. It loves you so well that only your ashes shall leave it."

His mouth was open for another sentence when he was struck. A whole pillar of marble from one of the rooms above came crashing through and buried him underneath a falling shower of masonry. Peter escaped by a few inches. Those who were left unhurt sprang through the yawning wall out into the garden. Sir John, Sogrange, Peter, and three of the men—one limping badly, came to a standstill in the middle of the lawn. Before them the house was crumbling like a pack of cards, and

louder even than the thunder of the falling structures was the roar of the red flames.

"The Baroness!" Peter cried, and took one leap forward.

"I am here," she sobbed, running to them from out of the shadows. "I have lost everything—my jewels, my clothes, all except what I have on. They gave me but a moment's warning."

"Is there anyone else in the house?" Peter demanded.

"No one but you who were in that room," she answered.

"Your companion?"

She shook her head.

"There was no companion," she faltered. "I thought it sounded better to speak of her. I had her place laid at table, but she never even existed."

Peter tore off his coat.

"There are the others in the room!" he exclaimed. "We must go back."

Sograngе caught him by the shoulder and pointed to a shadowy group some distance away.

"We are all out but Bernadine," he said. "For him there is no hope. Quick!"

They sprang back only just in time. The outside wall of the house fell with a terrible crash. The room which they had quitted was now blotted

out of existence. It was not long before, from right and left, in all directions along the country road, came the flashing of lights and little knots of hurrying people.

"It is the end!" Peter muttered. "Yesterday I should have regretted the passing of a brave enemy. To-day I hail with joy the death of a brute."

The Baroness, who had been sitting upon a garden seat, sobbing, came softly up to them. She laid her fingers upon Peter's arm imploringly.

"You will not leave me friendless?" she begged. "The papers I promised you are destroyed, but many of his secrets are here."

She tapped her forehead.

"Madame," Peter answered, "I have no wish to know them. Years ago I swore that the passing of Bernadine should mark my own retirement from the world in which we both lived. I shall keep my word. To-night Bernadine is dead. To-night, Sogrange, my work is finished."

The Baroness began to sob again.

"And I thought that you were a man," she moaned, "so gallant, so honourable——"

"Madame," Sogrange intervened, "I shall commend you to the pension list of the Double Four."

She dried her eyes.

"It is not money only I want," she whispered, her eyes following Peter.

Sograngе shook his head.

"You have never seen the Baroness de Grost?" he asked her.

"But no!"

"Ah!" Sograngе murmured. "Our escort, madame, is at your service—so far as London."

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